

# Camas

---

Volume 0  
Issue 8 *Fall 1996*

Article 1

---

Fall 1996

## Camas, Fall 1996

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/camas>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

(1996) "Camas, Fall 1996," *Camas*: Vol. 0 : Iss. 8 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/camas/vol0/iss8/1>

This Journal is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Camas by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).



# Camas

an environmental journal

Fall 1996

\$4.00

Foreward by Richard Nelson



1996 Teller Environmental Writing Institute



# Camas

## an environmental journal

Welcome to a special issue of Camas featuring the essays of the 1996 Teller Environmental Writing Institute. The institute is held each May at the Teller Wildlife Refuge in Corvallis, Montana. This year's institute was directed by Richard Nelson, author of *The Island Within*. Camas is honored to present an original essay by Richard as our foreward.

This is a limited edition of 300 copies. It is the first time we've charged for Camas, but it's for a good cause. We will be donating half the proceeds to the Teller Wildlife Refuge, as thanks for hosting the institute and in recognition of their conservation efforts. If you would like to make a donation to Camas or the refuge, or if you'd like to subscribe to Camas, please contact us at the address below.

Our Spring issue will be the first of our new format. Camas will be emerging as a bioregional journal addressing the issues and people of the Northern Rockies. We will feature in-depth articles on issues affecting this region, such as mining, water rights, and the emergence of watershed/community conservation groups. A new subtitle will accompany our new format—*People and Issues of the Northern Rockies*.

Thanks to all the contributing writers for sharing their work; to Richard Nelson for going above and beyond the call of duty; to Tara Thomas for gathering artwork; and, as always, to Rick Stern for his endless enthusiasm and long-term thinking. We would especially like to thank the William Bingham Foundation for a grant that allowed us to cover the printing costs of this issue and to ASUM for continuing support.

### Submissions

Camas is seeking articles on issues affecting the Northern Rockies, and profiles of people of the region. Please send a one-page inquiry with a writing sample.

As always, we are looking for artwork. Photographs should be black-and-white prints. We also encourage submission of sketches, drawings, photographs of sculpture, etc.

Please send a SASE if you would like your work returned. The deadline for artwork submissions is February 1, 1997. Deadline for inquiries is January 1, 1997.

### Staff

#### Editorial Board:

Meg Lojek, Leeann Drabenstott, Erica Olsen, Ian McCluskey, Rick Stern, Greg Hanscom, Tara Tomas, Polly Logan, and John Adams.

#### Layout and Design:

Kelley Segars

Camas  
c/o EVST/Rankin Hall  
University of Montana  
Missoula, MT 59812

email <avery@selway.umt.edu>



# Camas

## table of contents

Fall 1996

- |    |                                                                                                         |    |                                                                                  |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2  | <i>The Forest of Words</i><br>Richard Nelson                                                            | 42 | <i>To Admit to Oneself &amp;<br/>The Present As Place</i><br>Robert E. Druchniak |
| 6  | <i>Alone with the Future</i><br>Henri Bensussen                                                         | 45 | <i>The Oneness of Two</i><br>Tommy Youngblood-Petersen                           |
| 11 | <i>Bones</i><br>Duncan Adams                                                                            | 51 | <i>Reunion</i><br>Guy Hand                                                       |
| 16 | <i>Roots and Wings: A Bicycle<br/>Journey Across the West</i><br>Doug Johnson                           | 53 | <i>Three Points of Wind</i><br>James Taylor III                                  |
| 24 | <i>The Way Through:<br/>Selected Memoirs of Three<br/>Seasons in the Cascades</i><br>Caron Campbell     | 55 | <i>Revisiting the Forest</i><br>Cara Blessley                                    |
| 28 | <i>The Tower on Fern Hill:<br/>An Invitation &amp;<br/>Searching for the Faerie Ring</i><br>John Cooley | 59 | <i>A Good Time or<br/>a Bad Time</i><br>Melissa Walker                           |
| 34 | <i>Stones and Stories</i><br>Paul W. Birkeland                                                          |    |                                                                                  |
| 38 | <i>Mythmaker</i><br>Irma Ireland O'Brien                                                                |    |                                                                                  |



Richard Nelson

## THE FOREST OF WORDS

I am privileged to introduce these essays, written by a group of authors who share a heart-bound affinity for the natural world and pay homage through their words to the growing tradition of American nature writing. Serving as critics, editors, and sources of vital encouragement for one another, these authors shaped themselves into a small community as they collectively refined the words offered here. Before I offer some background comments on nature writing, I'd like to tell a story that is both fresh in mind and relevant to the subject at hand.

During moments of animal fear, your body becomes a mass of cells ignited for their own defense, a democratic frenzy of firing nerves, brain holding no priority over heart and spine, bowel and bone.

I had spent an hour picking salmonberries at the base of a mountain fronting Windfall Bay, not far from my home on the northwest Pacific Coast. Doused with bug repellent, clutching a small pail, I shoved and wriggled and crawled deeper into the thicker, filling my bucket with succulent berries and rewarding myself with frequent samples.

For me—and for many other folks around here—salmonberries are an important bonus for being alive. The berries range from deep yellow to purple, grow big as cherries, and taste unlike anything else, although they're related to raspberries and blackberries. The same sweetness that draws me to salmonberry patches each July attracts an assortment of other creatures, including songbirds, red squirrels, and the undisputed sovereigns of this wild coast—brown bears.

Dark thoughts of bears crossed my mind when I noticed a swatch of trampled grass and a few broken branches with empty stems where berries had been plucked. I looked around and listened, feeling vulnerable without even the dubious protection of pepper spray. So I rationalized that another person, surely not a bear, must have been here before me.

Farther up the slope I found a mother lode of salmonberries at the edge of a small, bowl-shaped opening with a clear streamlet tumbling through the middle. There was more flattened grass near its edge, but again nothing to indicate whether a human or a bear was responsible. I lost myself in the ambrosial flavor of salmonberries, the warmth of periodic sunbursts, the rattle of branches in freshening wind, the scent of green leaves and moldering soil, the beauty of high peaks shimmering with ice fields. I felt utterly satisfied with my lot this day: a man working his chosen home grounds, an animal eating and breathing on the summer side of earth.

When I finished picking all the berries I could glean from an especially rich spot, I forced my way through a snarl of

branches, stepped blindly ahead, and nearly tumbled into the little stream. Embarrassed by my clumsiness, I instinctively glanced over my shoulder, as if someone might have noticed.

To my perfect astonishment, somebody had.

At the other side of the little opening, atop a huge fallen tree trunk not more than thirty feet away, stood a darkly furred, hump-shouldered, full-bellied, heavy-haunched, thick-necked brown bear.

He leaned forward as if to snuffle for a salmonberry, but abruptly changed his mind, hunched back, and heaved a great, sighing breath. For a moment he looked away, perhaps offering me the chance for a dignified retreat, but then he turned and stared directly at me, showing his broad forehead, his round and densely furred ears, his impassive eyes. I sensed in him a palpable lack of concern, and yet I believed he must feel threatened, impatient, or irritated.

For a protracted eternity of seconds the bear stood silent and still, like a boulder balanced precariously on a mountainside.

And I did exactly the same, as if I needed time to savor the depth of my predicament, to feel the lightning arc across my temples, the thunder burst inside my chest. At last, I mustered the boldness to turn deliberately away, and I began an almost unbearably slow, carefully controlled, but absolutely determined and unfaltering retreat. I still clutched the bucket full of berries, which I figured to dump if the bear came at me, hoping he might accept them as an offering, a bribe, or a substitute for whatever menu he had in mind.

During the long, uncoiling minutes while I eased my way down the slope, my initial fear gave way to a swirl of thoughts: Like the bear, I am an omnivore and a predator, nourished by salmon, halibut, and deer. But on this wild, island coast, I am also potential prey, which seems to me an appropriate balance. Now, perhaps, I understood how a rabbit feels, spotting the flick of a coyote's tail, or a deer, catching the rush of a cougar's breath. This fleeting insight brought me an almost overwhelming sense of exhilaration. For me, claiming a place as home means having a place in the food chain, and not necessarily at the top.

Breathless, I stopped to look back up the hill and saw the bear still on his log, nibbling salmonberries. It seemed as if our encounter had been nothing more to him than a brief distraction, or at best a little entertainment.

Nevertheless, I apologized for whatever inconvenience I might have caused, deferring to a creature far more powerful than myself, whose ancestors had inhabited this place long before mine, and who surely knew the land in ways I could never imagine. I realized, on the other hand, that we both belong here and that we can share the land harmoniously, even if it means an occasional risk.

Before turning away, I whispered a few words of thanks for the bear's tolerance and for the reminders he'd given me. Then I headed farther down the shore to pick more salmonberries, while the bear stayed behind to do the same.



What this story brings to mind about nature writing—or at least about my own approach to the work—is the critical importance of *being there*.

By this I don't just mean wandering around outdoors. I mean pouring yourself through the natural world, going as deep as possible into whatever you hope to experience, finding new ways to engage your body and senses with the environment, taking chances if that suits you, feeling free to edge toward obsession and eccentricity, and giving yourself as much time as it takes to acquire what writer and mountaineer Leon Sinclair calls "the authority of experience."

I'm not sure how I would write about brown bears if I'd only seen them rarely and from a distance, or if I'd encountered them far away from home, where I do not participate in the food chain or take active membership in the living community. I only know that it would be different; not better or worse, just different.

Of course, most nature writers strive toward physical or sensory immersion in their subject, although immersion is defined and expressed in a tremendous variety of ways. It's this diversity of approach, perspective, and style that makes nature writing so rich. The only rule is that there is no rule, and so writers have enormous freedom to flex their imaginations.

In fact, some authors prefer not to be classified as "nature writers" at all, because this separates them from other writers and, more importantly, it marginalizes an important body of literature. This opinion is held by people far more experienced and knowledgeable than I am; and yet I must admit that it elevates my soul to be called a nature writer.

Perhaps our different viewpoints derive from our different backgrounds. Some people come to this work, first and foremost, as *writers*, and nature is their chosen subject. On the other hand, some begin their careers in fields like biology, environmental studies, or the physical sciences—which means they don't have an academic background in literature or writing. In my own case, I started out with fairly technical reports on my ethnographic studies in Alaskan Native communities, and gradually—over a period of twenty years—I developed a serious interest in writing.

Perhaps my experience as an apprentice to traditional hunter-gatherers explains my belief that, beyond simply "being there," it's important to *become viscerally involved*. For the intimacy so vital to nature writing, I think it helps to involve more—far more indeed—than simply your eyes and mind. John Muir showed how it's done when he climbed to the heights of a tall tree during a rampaging Sierra Nevada storm, so he could better feel the power of wind. Every one of us, after reading Muir's account, knows he understood something about storms that he never would have achieved hunkering on the ground or looking out the window.

This idea has unlimited possibilities. To write about wild rivers, put on a wetsuit and let yourself sweep downstream like a twig in the rapids, eddies, and standing waves. Or to gain more sense for the atmosphere, put on a parachute and jump from an airplane. I'm reminded of African pygmy hunters who would sneak directly underneath an elephant and move around

with it, keeping positioned where the animal couldn't see them as they speared it repeatedly in the vital organs. I love to read accounts where writers have put themselves under the belly of their subject. It doesn't have to involve danger, but there's always another angle, another way to get viscerally involved.

Henry David Thoreau left this thought in his journal on September 2, 1851:

*We cannot write well or truly but what we write with gusto. The body, the senses, must conspire with the mind. Expression is the act of the whole man, that our speech may be vascular. The intellect is powerless to express thought without the aid of the heart and liver and every member. Often I feel that my head stands out too dry when it should be immersed. A writer, a man writing, is the scribe of all nature; he is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing.*

It was also Thoreau who wrote, "The bluebird carries the sky on his back." Somehow this brings to mind the importance of *paying attention*, a skill requiring years, perhaps a whole lifetime, to fully develop. My own teachers in this regard were Iñupiaq Eskimos, Gwich'in Indians, and Koyukon Indians, who live in the tundra and boreal forest country of northern Alaska. During our travels, I saw how expert hunters rely on attentiveness so heightened, so acute, that it seems almost preternatural; yet I came to understand that such attention develops through study and practice.

In this way, the Iñupiaq hunter learns to spot a polar bear moving among distant ice ridges and discovers how to attract the bear by imitating a seal asleep on the snow. And in this way, the Gwich'in hunter learns to find a moose by watching for subtle cues like broken branches in willow thickets, and to judge the freshness of its hoofprints by touching the snow at their edges.

Over countless generations, my Eskimo and Indian teachers had achieved a subtle and masterful knowledge of their surrounding world: of animal behavior and ecology, of forest and tundra, of snow and ice, of weather and sky, of river and sea. And, perhaps most importantly, they had learned how to engage all of their senses, their bodies, and their souls with the surrounding world. "The earth and I are of one mind," explained the Nez Perce leader, Chief Joseph. What applies to the Native American hunter can apply equally to the writer and the naturalist—any of us willing to hone our attentiveness through devotion and patience and involvement.

This, I think, is also the basis for *writing passionately*, in a way that draws from the heart and senses as well as the mind. Coming from a discipline that aspires toward science, I learned to suppress all but the empirical impulse, to strive toward language as cold as concrete, and to expel the emotional dimension from my writing. Later, I wondered how anyone could ever portray the fullness of human experience under such blinding constraints, but it took years to wrench myself free. Writers with backgrounds in literature and the arts may find it difficult to understand what I'm talking about here, coming as they do from a more open, imaginative, and liberated tradition.



Even the strictest scientific disciplines are well served by writing that allows some drift away from hard empiricism. The work of Edward O. Wilson demonstrates beautifully that uncompromising science can be embraced by uncompromising humanity. Much as I love what scientists teach us about our world, I have never understood why their writing should be devoid of enthusiasm, drained of any sense for personal engagement, and translated into nearly impenetrable prose. The enthralling revelations of science deserve all the passion and intensity we can give them.

Here is Thoreau, writing in his journal on February 18, 1852:

*I have a commonplace book for facts and another for poetry, but I find it difficult always to preserve the vague distinction which I had in my mind, for the most interesting and beautiful facts are so much the more poetry and that is their success. They are translated from earth to heaven. I see that if my facts were sufficiently vital and significant—perhaps translated more into the substance of the human mind—I should need but one book of poetry to contain them all.*

This might be the founding principle of American nature writing, and it embodies the greatest challenge facing everyone who struggles to capture in words our knowledge and experiences of the natural world.

For those who aspire toward Thoreau's union of facts and poetry, it's also essential to *read excellent writing*, so we can learn from works that exemplify our ideals. Nowadays, an amazing number of writers focus on the natural world, doing it with elegance and insight, constantly expanding our range of viewpoints—women and men, city dwellers and suburbanites, Native Americans, and people from other ethnic backgrounds, farmers and ranchers, fishermen and hunters, scientists and naturalists of every stripe, prose writers and poets, authors focusing on personal growth and spirituality, travel and home, family and community. The assortment is wonderful and it's also daunting, because no one could possibly read enough to keep pace with the new literature.

I suppose people of all times and cultures have been drawn to the same questions that concern most contemporary nature writers: What can we learn about our mystifying and glorious earth? How do we belong in the community of life? What is our proper relationship to the environment that sustains us? How can we adequately celebrate the beauty around us? It's important to remember that some of the deepest insights and most exquisite words come to us from Native American literature—stories, poems, and chants—of which only a small sampling has been translated into printed words.

Native American traditions evoke the natural world in ways that European peoples have forgotten or long overlooked—a world filled with spirit and awareness, a world to which humankind owes reverence and obedience, a world inseparable from all aspects of human existence. This sense of nature is reflected in testimony attributed to the Divine Deer People, given by Navajo elder and medicine man, Claus Chee Sonny:

*The usefulness of the deer is the foundation which has been laid; it serves as an example for other things. This is what is meant when we say that the deer are first in all things. We [the deer] are in the gods who are mentioned, in the mountains, in the rainbows, in the roots of sunlight, in the lightnings...we are in all the plants. In this manner, even the insects are associated with us...you can put deer meat as medicine on sheep, on horses, and on other domesticated animals. All livestock lives because of the deer. That is what keeps the animals moist, breathing, walking about, and altogether alive. And animals are our food. They are our thoughts.*

When European settlers arrived, they found an astonishing natural beauty and abundance on this continent, which had been intensively used by Native American people for at least 10,000 years. We are reminded in this way that humans can live in an environment over prodigious spans of time without having a profoundly destructive impact on wildlife, vegetation, and landscape (despite the unavoidable or intentional changes caused by any habitation).

With this example in mind, I believe an essential part of the nature writer's work is to show that *people can have a rightful place on the land*. Writers like Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and Gary Nabhan draw from Western traditions as well as indigenous cultures to illuminate some basic truths that we often overlook: that human beings can hold responsible membership in the natural community; that we must center our relationship to the environment around principles of humility, respect, and restraint; that we can maintain ecological balance while also sustaining ourselves—as every creature must—by taking other lives; and that we should acknowledge with joy and reverence the connections between ourselves, our fellow humans, and the natural community to which we all belong.

In this context, I believe *matters of conscience, ethics, politics, and activism* are basic to most nature writing, whether or not they are explicitly stated. Most people who write about nature are motivated by fascination and love for their subject, and they write in a time when much of the natural world is grievously threatened. Nature writing invites readers to share a similar fascination and love, and so it always carries political weight.

In an interview with Stephen Trimble, Colorado nature writer and artist Ann Zwinger said: "I write for people who have no idea of what's going on out there. I want to say, look, this is the best of all possible worlds. If we don't pay attention to it, we won't have it, and if we don't have it, we won't have us either."

At its deepest level, nature writing helps to change society's world view—our collective sense of relationship to nature and our beliefs about proper behavior toward the environment. In this regard, I think Euro-Americans are moving gradually toward the Native American world view, perhaps as our own intellectual tradition sinks deeper roots into the North American landscape. And I am certain that nature writing is a vital part of this process.

Nature writing has become the foundation for a growing community of authors who are not only colleagues but also friends. They stay in touch by letter or telephone, enjoy times



together at readings and conferences, support each other's work and celebrate every author's successes. There is a remarkable lack of competitiveness among these writers, partly (I suppose) because none are likely to get rich, but more importantly because nature writers *work in service to their subject*. They write to elevate the natural world—something far greater and more important than

themselves. Perhaps, too, nature writing attracts a certain kind of personality, and we all know that like-minded folks usually enjoy each other's company. In any case, I think shared dedication to a "cause"—celebrating and protecting our earthly habitat—unites these authors in a special and delightful way.

There is another element in this as well. Anyone who undertakes to write about something so vast, complex, and ineffable as nature must recognize the futility of ever living up to the subject. This sense of inadequacy undoubtedly helps to keep egos from soaring too high. Robinson Jeffers, whose poetry long predates the modern growth of nature writing, said it well:

I hate my verses, every line, every word.  
Oh pale and brittle pencils ever to try  
One grass blade's curve, or the throat of one bird  
That clings to twig, ruffled against white sky...

If we can never live up to our subject, at least we can share our love for it with the best of company. Besides the informal network of friends that has arisen from nature writing, there are also countless gatherings devoted to the subject—in university writing programs, at institutes and conferences, in workshops and gatherings, and at meetings of an organization dedicated to nature writing: the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment.

During our solitary times, we have the unparalleled rewards of spending time outdoors, being in places that have fixed themselves at the depths of our hearts, having closeness to the animals, the trees, the rivers, the hills, the weather, and the open sky. Add to these rewards the pleasure of reflecting on our experiences, adding to our knowledge, elevating our spirits, and pouring out words that preserve some memory of what the world has given us.

In this sense, no goal is more important than *writing for yourself*. What you write may never be published, may be seen only by a few kindly and interested friends, or might be read by no one except yourself. But as long as you have gone outdoors and opened yourself to nature, the one true success has already been achieved.

If it became necessary, I know that I could live happily without writing, but I cannot imagine living at all without wild nature.

I've mentioned the growing diversity of people who write about nature and the variety of subjects they explore in their work. Essays presented in this collection represent a similar diversity of perspective and topic: affiliation with home and place, nature in the context of family and friends, rural life, urban nature, travel and touring, natural science, relationships to animals and plants, gathering and hunting, Native American

traditions, environmental ethics and activism.

These essays, in all their elegance and variety, become a part of the world celebrating itself.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE:

I have quoted from the following sources:

Jeffers, Robinson. *Selected Poems*. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

Luckert, Karl. *The Navaio Hunter Tradition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975.

Thoreau, Henry David. *The Selected Journals of Henry David Thoreau*. New York: Signet, 1967.

Trimble, Stephen (ed.). *Words from the Land*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995.



Henri Benussen

## Alone with the Future

I drive down the McKenzie River highway, toward Eugene, Oregon, toward home in California 600 miles south, free to take every quirk in the road; to stop or not. It's just me, the car, and a two-lane road. For someone who is a product of the 1950's, this is the ultimate scene of personal freedom.

I've just left the writing workshop I've attended every summer for the last three years. Those hours of sitting on the deck over the river, hearing the constant rush of water, watching for the great blue heron that might come flapping up the river from the west on its heavy wings, writing in my journal, trying to fashion poetry out of existence, to fashion sense out of sounds—that's over now. Time to move on to a new experience, a fresh approach, a different way of writing. Time to consider the future as an opening rather than an ending.

Divorced after a quarter-century of marriage, I'm a woman in her fifth decade who has recently discovered her lesbianism. The revelation that led to this happened on a hiking trip. My husband and I were following a snow-covered trail made by the bootprints of hikers earlier in the day. We had stopped for a rest and to eat our sandwiches. When we turned to go back we lost our sense of direction—the snow was dotted with bootprints everywhere we looked. My husband tried different paths, took us across icy creeks, seemed to be going in circles. As we plodded along I began to realize that this feeling of being lost, of hopeless wandering, was similar to how I was increasingly beginning to feel about our marriage. Suddenly I stopped. Why was I following him? I was sure he was going the wrong way. I called out that I was going to find my own way back. In a short time I did lead us to the right trail.

During the ensuing weeks I explored the idea of divorce. The feelings for women that I had ignored in my premarital teenage years now came to seem a possible alternative to what had become for me the barrenness of heterosexuality. Books and movies documented lesbianism, considered a state of mental imbalance if discussed at all when I was in high school, as a kind of life a woman like me could enter and be happy in. Our children were grown, I had a job. It was the logical time, the best time, for me to leave this marriage.

I reach Eugene and manage to navigate the highway interchanges with only one wrong turn to get myself onto Highway 126. Following the map west to Florence, on the coast, I pass Venestra and Elmira. Trees and wildflowers grow right to the edge of the highway, the clean campgrounds all seem to be set on the banks of deep rivers or lakes. Compared to California's dryness, everything is green and lush.

Between Walton and Mapleton the road crosses the Suislaw River, which loops back to parallel the road. I can't see the river, but I know from the map we'll both reach the coast together in about ten miles. Anticipation keeps me awake, along with daydreams of living in a rural environment, something I wanted as young girl growing up in Los Angeles.

The river is still mysterious and hidden as I reach Florence. Turning off into the older section of town, I find a cafe that has jars of fresh flowers on the tables and order coffee and cake. Looking out the front window I notice boat masts and rigging above the roofs across the street. I walk through a passage between two stores and suddenly it's there—the river—

wide and waving in the wind, carrying upon it fishing boats anchored at a small dock. The harbor is quiet, hardly any people, here on the Suislaw River near its meeting with the Pacific. An anchorage secure against the current.

Next morning I continue south on Highway 1, past mountainous sand dunes that cut us off from the ocean. As I drive through Coos Bay slowed by traffic signals, I experience a quickening of feeling that this might be a place that would welcome me. Yet Coos Bay is economically depressed, from the look of the many boarded-up buildings and the For Rent signs.

Another 26 miles of highway thickly edged with Douglas fir and I'm in Bandon. Here too is a fishing harbor on a river, the Coquille. Bandon, unlike Florence, acknowledges its river, does not hide it behind buildings as though it had been made irrelevant by modern, urban commerce. I can see in the distance where the river empties into the ocean between rock jetties. There is an art gallery, a bookstore and two coffeehouses, along with the port. Across the river is the Bandon Lighthouse. According to plaques along the street, this part of Bandon burned to the ground in 1935, from an out-of-control forest fire that also fed on the gorse the founding father imported from Ireland. This gorse is thick with resin and thorns. It comes up wherever the land is disturbed. I've seen it all along the coast. It's a cousin to the brooms—that same bright yellow flower.

The intuitive feeling of possibility that I had in Coos Bay is stronger here. Bandon is small, but not tiny, with a population around 3,000. It has art and books, a mix of fishermen, retailers, craftspeople, retired people. I have lunch in Old Town at a restaurant called Lloyd's of Bandon. People greet each other as they come in. The talk is of the morning's fishing, of the drought—only 44 inches of rain this year. A pickup truck with rowdy young women in back pulls up; the women jump out and head for a nearby bar. I take it as a good sign. Finding a real estate catalogue filled with enticing ads for land, I hungrily scan prices that are inexpensive to my California eyes.

As I drive toward San Francisco and home, the idea that I could retire to Oregon, to this coastal area, takes over my imagination. I like the concept of a harbor, a place of safety that one returns to after trips out into the larger world, a world where travelers are unprotected from the elements of either nature or civilization. When I arrive in San Jose, I envision the future of a rural life in Bandon to my friends Linda and Carol. Linda is enthusiastic, Carol doubtful. I tell them my plan to buy land in Oregon, near the coast, in the trees, where I could grow and sell herbs. Carol tells me I'll starve.

"What about vegetables, fruit trees?" I respond, imagining the feel of earth, full berry buckets at my feet.

"That whole area up there is depressed, nobody has money," Carol answers from the depths of her experience as an accountant.

"Chickens," I say. "I'll raise chickens and go fishing; lots of fish there."

"You're wasting your resources," she says.

"How about pies and bread? I'm a good baker. Can't you see it? Ms. Bee's Breads and Pies!"

Carol finally smiles. "Yes," she agrees, "that would work. A person can always make a living selling bread."

Linda and I visit Bandon later in the year. We have an appointment with a real estate agent, Chuck, who has advertised acreage right outside town. When we arrive he's not there,



but another salesman gives us directions. We turn down Highway 42S, which runs from Bandon along the south edge of the Coquille River to the town of Coquille. We're on this road only for a couple hundred yards, then we turn right onto Ohio Street, here a pocked dirt road lined with recently built houses. There are two deep dips like a rollercoaster before it ends a quarter-mile up. The deepest dip descends to within ten feet of what's named Ferry Creek that flows east to west and is lined with alders.

We turn left onto a rutted track edged with blackberry bushes. There are small farms, pastures of grass, a few homes set back in the fir trees that increasingly take over the landscape. Another quarter-mile up and the road ends where there are two parcels of land for sale, one on either side. I'm interested in the smaller though costlier parcel on the right because it includes part of a large pond.

We decide to explore and strike off in a southerly direction toward where the pond should be. Very soon we lose sight of the car and find ourselves wandering through endless Douglas fir, broken by huge clumps of thorny blackberries and dense shrubbery. We come upon an old road overgrown with salal vines that we wade through as if it was a mass of seaweed. We find a big area of dead manzanita that must have sprouted after the 1935 fire then was shaded out by the maturing firs. Lost and cold, and after what seems like hours, we break through to an open passage recently hacked from the underbrush. Then we hear a car horn.

It's our real estate agent. We follow the sound and come out into the clearing where we had parked.

Chuck looks concerned; we look grimy. We have been wandering on the wrong side of the road, he says. He knows a path into the forest and if we're still interested, he'll lead us. Soon we are enveloped in quiet green twilight. Now that we are not feeling lost or bent on reaching a goal like the pond, I can enjoy the moss that carpets old, downed logs, the solemn pillars of the large firs that stand apart from the clutter of close-growing younger trees. Chuck notes that a thinning would increase the health of these younger firs. He too soon loses his sense of direction, but we all find our way back because this time we have been very careful to keep track of where we are.

Chuck points out the test pits that have been dug to show that a future septic system is feasible, and tells us he's secured a permit to install one that is good for 24 months. This is zoned forest preserve he tells us, but if we establish a homesite within the two-year timeframe of the permit, an acre can be taken out with no problem. Forest preserve means that the re-

sources of the land are to be used for forest-related products. This could be lumbering, mushroom harvesting, or gathering the ubiquitous salal to sell to florists.

At Chuck's office we discuss prices. I can't really afford the parcel of land with the pond, but he thinks I could easily buy the acreage we were lost in, and besides there's more of it: 15 acres versus 10. The owner, he is sure, will reduce the price a few thousand. I make out a check for a down payment, an investment in a different future from any past I've known. It isn't the utopian vision I had of land with water on it, of open meadow and leafy forest. Instead it's fairly flat, no creeks, thickly covered with conifers, but it does back up to a fish hatchery and the town's reservoir on Geiger Creek, according to the map Chuck gives us, and it's within walking distance of town. I've spent so many hours of my working life commuting, that when I retire I want to have access to the necessities of life without needing to rely on a car.

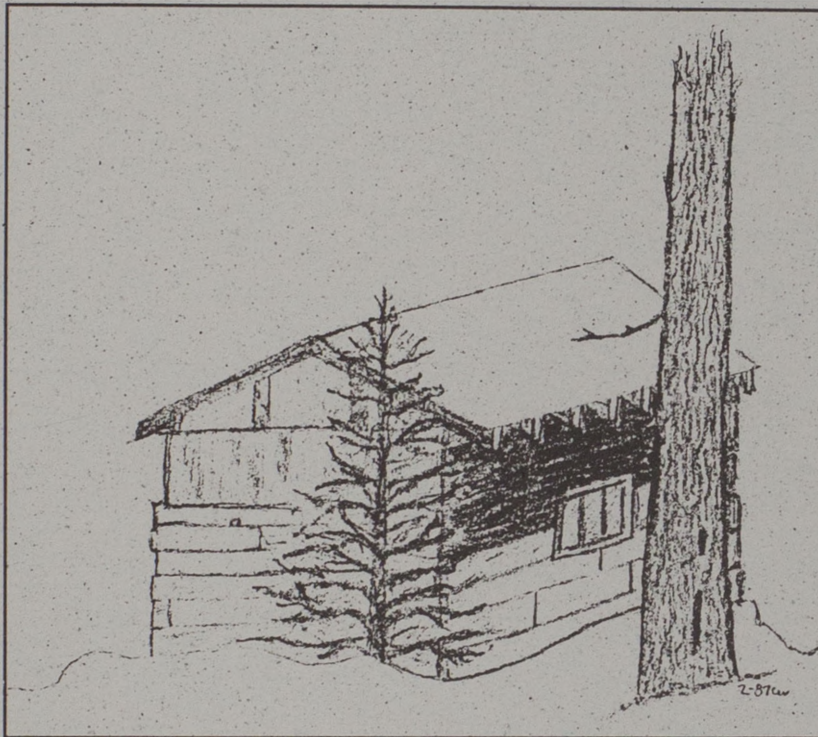
We drive back to the forest afterward and look at it again. This land will soon be mine, along with ten years of payments. Mother Nature, by forcing me to wander through it against my will and seemingly lost, has made the decision for me. I have been in exile from my longing to live in a more natural world, and now I can work with a renewed sense of purpose, knowing that what I save for is this hopeful future.

Chuck pointed out a cutoff from our road that leads to the head of the pond,

where a creek was dammed years ago. We stop there before leaving, see a pair of mallards, hear a gnatcatcher, watch shadows of clouds move across the surface of the water. The pond, not very wide, extends far back into the trees, its shore thick with undergrowth. We could never have made it through from where we started earlier in the day.

Linda helps me spin dreams of life in Oregon: a log cabin with a spacious attic for drying herbs, a big kitchen in which to prepare food, a garden of every kind of lavender, growing potatoes and onions, planting an apple orchard, catching fish and crabs in the river. I hope it comes true; I have taken the first step.

The following summer I return to Bandon alone. I'm thankful I work at a place with a generous vacation policy. After an 11-hour drive, I reach town at 6 p.m., stop at a roadside stand for blackberry jam and at a market for groceries, arrive at "my" acreage, and park as close as possible to the path that



Artwork: Caroline Woods



leads into the forest. It is odd to think of this bit of forested land belonging to anyone; it really belongs to itself.

A small clearing about 50 feet from the car provides space for a tent and a big downed tree trunk serves as a table. It's 8:30 and still light. My first visitor is a small brown bird that makes a clicking noise; I guess it to be a winter wren. Two ducks fly over quacking loudly, and the rise and fall of a hermit thrush's song fills the air, along with the tapping of a woodpecker. It's been beautiful, sunny, very windy along the coast, but calm here in the forest. Twilight lingers; I'm asleep before it's truly dark.

The next morning birds call, first one, then all of them chiming in. I turn over and go back to sleep for an hour.

Things outside are very quiet, only one bird left to call out, but soon the others join in again. I turn into my sleeping bag, not yet ready to get up. When I do leave the sanctuary of the tent I'm met by mosquitoes. I make coffee and oatmeal, thinking I have set up camp and am taking care of myself with no one's help. I used to pride myself on that, when I was 18, but then came lack of real

faith, early marriage, giving up dreams too easily. Maybe the problem was that girls were so often blocked from dreams of a real future, which in those days meant teaching or nursing or being a librarian—society pulling us back from the liberated employment outlook of the war years, now that the men were home. I opted instead for the security of marriage, doing what was expected of a wife and mother, years of losing confidence in what I was capable of. Now I am gradually gaining that back.

The sun hangs above the trees and shines in my eyes. After studying the map of the property and a topo map of the area, I follow the wisp of trail and begin to explore. I mark my way with little bows of yellow plastic tape tied to overhanging branches, and carry a compass in my pocket. What trail there is is overgrown with huckleberry and tanbark oak, but I manage to reach the fish hatchery beyond the back property line on the other side of the old road. This was the road found in our wanderings the previous year. It's completely tangled in healthy salal vines; their leaves are a waxy green and their purple berries are edible, though dry.

I sit on the sunny bank high above what must be the city's reservoirs on Geiger Creek, which meets Ferry Creek at the fish hatchery. There are nursery tanks for the fish and a building far to my left. Foxgloves and red elderberry bloom. A grove of cedars with their stretched-out branches sweeping down to the ground forms an almost impenetrable barrier behind me. It is so quiet. No one seems to be at the hatchery, or maybe they're inside. I move back into the shade to remain unseen.

Growing along the bank are alders, a rough-edged grass, a few maples, blackberry, thimbleberry, ferns, ripe red huckleberries. To the southwest I discover a narrow stream

flowing down a small gully that empties into the reservoir. Higher up, embraced by salal vines, is an old rusted-out Ford. I wonder how it came to be here—was it driven off the road in an accident? Dumped here on purpose? A swampy depression near the stream bank is filled with skunk cabbage and sword fern. (Chuck had mentioned springs just off the property line.) I find my way to the trail that leads to my campsite, feeling tired though it's not yet noon.

I sleep for awhile, then read and have tea and crackers. The wind is up from the east. I can hear the hum of traffic from the highway, and a small plane flies over. My idyllic retreat is turning out to not be quite the haven of peacefulness I had expected. I give myself up to reading, bundled in my sleeping bag.

The next day I go for a walk on the unmaintained section of Ohio Street that continues south. Red raspberries, mint, daisies, and red clover, pioneers of the plant world, grow in the ditches along the side of the road whose deep, wide ruts still hold water. Resident dogs bark from hidden yards as I pass each fenced section. Gorse is taking over areas that were once cleared.

In about ten minutes I come out onto Bill Creek Road, which winds its way out of town from the main highway. I see an older woman walking out to her mailbox. She doesn't notice me, so I say hello in a loud voice. She turns and peers at me from inside her sun bonnet.

"I'm new here," I say, "and just taking a walk"

"I never have time for that, anymore," she answers.

"What keeps you so busy," I ask.

"It's my diabetic husband," she says, "He takes all my time. When I get a minute I do my gardening."

"Do you live nearby?"

"Oh yes, right back there," she says, pointing to an old house trailer beyond a large vegetable garden.

"What's your source of water?"

"We have a well. Digging your own well is best," she says. "The City's water isn't any good. They put chemicals in it. You can't trust it."

I tell her I will certainly put in a well. We talk some more and then say good-bye. I will have to drill a well, I know, since there is no city water past Ohio Street. Electricity will have to be brought in too, but that is years away.

Later, back in the forest, I try to find the property lines by following what I assume are the surveyor's weathered plastic ribbons that hang from tree branches like old party streamers. I end up lost again, but eventually find my way back, forcing my way through tall huckleberry bushes. There are two types of them. The red is a juicy, sweet berry on a bush with light green, soft leaves. The coarser type has tough branches sprouting from its base and dark blue, seedy berries. This evergreen huckleberry is like the manzanita, to which it's related. In fact, there's a whole progression of the family in this forest, from the treelike madrone and rhododendron, both of which are present toward the south, to the manzanita and huckle-

---

### *A three-card spread.*

*The past shows as Emperor card:*

*rigidity, bossiness. The present comes up as the Ace of Pentacles: something new is manifesting—a gift, a new life, a new job.*

*The future is the Nine of Pentacles—development of strength and courage, material goods. Bread? Pies?*

---



berry, and the low-growing salal. Cousin to the heaths, they thrive on this kind of soil—loose, sandy, somewhat acidic.

In the evening after dinner I congratulate myself for having managed not to pierce my eardrum or gouge out an eye or sprain my ankle or break a leg. Before turning in I do a tarot reading for myself. A three-card spread. The past shows as the Emperor card: rigidity, bossiness. The present comes up as the Ace of Pentacles: something is manifesting—a gift, a new life, a new job. The future is the Nine of Pentacles—development of strength and courage, material goods. Bread? Pies?

Saturday morning I awake early thinking about the woman I had met on Bill Creek Road. She said it takes her three days to write a letter because she's so busy. The old-fashioned sunbonnet she wore covered her eyes; it forced her to keep her eyes down in order to see where she was going. She told me I could still plant beans and squash this time of year, but tomatoes only in the hottest areas. I'll have to clear an acre of land here, to break up this forest, yet the result will mean food and a living. One change, and the effect ripples out to touch everything. Part of the anxiety of the unknown that I must deal with.

At 7:15 the sun is up enough to shine through the trees. This morning at breakfast the mosquitoes have not yet discovered me, or maybe they're bored. Entranced by the different birdsongs, I prepare for another foray into the forest. Suddenly there's a rustling and then a young man appears.

"Hi," he says as he steps out from the bushes.

"Hello," I say with surprise.

He mumbles an introduction I don't catch, then with a wide gesture he tells me that he and great numbers of his family live on the surrounding land, on the other side of the pond.

"I've never seen anyone camping here before," he says.

I tell him I've recently bought this property. He says he's picking chanterelles for dinner and points out some small orange caps in the bottom of the tin pail he's carrying. I had noticed a few of these growing at the base of the fir trees.

"Well, got to get going," he says, and disappears again into the trees.

I listen until the clanking sound of the pail fades away. He seemed friendly, but I hadn't expected to meet anyone here.

During my morning's exploration every odd sound makes me turn and search the underbrush. I'm feeling intruded upon, off balance. I begin to notice the large number of rusty beer and soda cans half buried along the many paths that meander and then fade away without ever leading anywhere. The family from across the pond, and maybe other neighbors, must comb the forests around here for chanterelles, not just for a meal but to sell for income.

Eventually I reach the fish hatchery area. The weather has changed; the air feels cooler and it looks like it may rain tonight. I go along to the creek and the little seepage where I was on Thursday, and then I'm lost; I must have gone too far south. Surrounded by dense thickets of huckleberries, I stop moving, scan the underbrush, the army of trees, what sky there is to see, now that the sun is hidden by cloud. In the distance I spot a yellow tag marking the trail and so make my way back. The key is to relax into the natural world, allow the senses to take over. If one's instinct is to circle, following your feet may be as good as any other method of coming eventually to a landmark that points the way toward home. This is not exactly a wilderness, I remind myself.

I discover an amanita mushroom and then an orchid. My plant book shows it to be a rein orchid. The slender stem, about a foot tall, holds tiny white flowers. I'd almost missed it. A green and yellow snake crosses the path. Two different cedars grow here. The kind near the fish hatchery is Port Orford cedar, which can grow to 200 feet; the other, mixed in with the fir, is the much shorter western red cedar. I look in my mushroom book for chanterelles. A fine, edible mushroom, it says; not easily cultivated. It grows on the roots of Douglas fir in a mycorrhizal relationship, and gives back nitrogen in return.

After placing a tarp over the tent in case of rain, I walk into town. On the way I stop to see Chuck at the real estate office. He says the ten-acre parcel on the south boundary of my land has been sold to a man from Southern California. I wonder if and when a neighbor will move in. I'm already used to, and treasuring, my isolated privacy, although that has proven ephemeral.

A number of people are fishing off the dock that outlines the small fishing harbor at Old Town on the river. On Bandon Beach near the south jetty it's low tide, the sky overcast. I watch the sea gulls wheeling above the great offshore sea-stacks where they nest. Here is the drama of the Oregon coastline—the great rocky formations, what was the old coast now cut off from the land. On the beach I explore some of the huge boulders, which are a green or almost blue rock seamed with white. The low surf has exposed a gravelly beach of small stones, jade and agate in vibrant colors. There are some clam shells, a lot of driftwood.

Sunday morning as I prepare to leave, my first four-legged visitor appears, a small gray squirrel. As soon as it sees me it scurries behind a tree. I load up the car with my gear, drive out to Bandon Beach for a final walk, to Port Orford for a second breakfast. There are comparatively large towns every 25 or so miles along the coast. Large tracts of land along the highway south of Bandon are being cleared for cranberry bogs. A sign says that Bandon is the cranberry capital of the west coast. Farther south are sheep pastures and blueberry farms.

A huge arrow painted on the highway directs me to the Port Orford Viewpoint. The weather has turned windy and cold, with storm clouds coming in from the north. A large seagull, pure white, rosy feet and legs, orange spot on its underbeak, has landed on the rock directly in front of the car and keeps his eye on me. The view here is of a huge curve of land to what must be Crescent City in California. I start the car and head south.

Just before Gold Beach, I turn off to the Rogue River and park. The quiet is comforting after the noise of the car. I'm already missing that sense of quiet I had in the forest. Waves of light glisten across the water to the far shore, thrown by the wind. Pelicans over there. A group of otters pass by. Cormorants fishing; they beat the water with their wings and then dive. The Rogue must be chock-full of nutritional items.

In late afternoon I reach Mill Creek Campground below Crescent City, the northernmost city on the California coast. What's the difference between my forest and Mill Creek, besides Mill Creek itself (now dried up) and stumps of logged-off giant redwoods? The trails are wide and dappled with light. Broadleaf trees make up the understory. Things are managed. There are beware signs here, for ticks; bears; raccoons. I see a brownish rabbit, a grass snake, sparrows, chipmunks, centipedes. Lots of mosquitoes. There will be no "beware" signs for me, but I will plant some maples and the white oak native to



Oregon. My forest needs more deciduous trees, more color to break up the somberness of the firs and cedars.

Where, really, is the place that is home, the city or the country, north or south? I begin to know the forest's trees, remember their shapes, and imagine a homesite, there in Oregon, sheltered to the north by Douglas fir, open to the south and the sunlight. Fruit trees and vegetables, mossy logs like miniature gardens, wildflowers, clear air. A night sky with so many stars there is hardly an area bare of them.

During the long drive down Highway 101 to San Jose my mind is occupied with the idea of the nature of a house. Some are safe harbors and others are all cold, sharp corners. It's not just a place to hang your hat. It must both shelter and sustain. A hearth is the element, the symbolic heart, that provides the pool of warmth at the center of that building we call home. Now that I've committed myself to this land, this place in coastal Oregon, the question of what constitutes a home becomes of prime importance.

I think about Thoreau, his journal-writing, and *Walden*, the book it led to. He wrote that a house is merely the extension of a porch that leads to the root cellar, that more than a shelter from wet and cold, it has to be a place to store the food one grows. It need not be larger than a tent, he thought, or just big enough for a bed, a table, three chairs, the fireplace, a cupboard.

Thoreau launched himself on a two-year experiment in the suburb of Walden Pond. He planted a couple of acres of vegetables in a cleared field. He needed only a wheelbarrow, his hoe, his axe, and his knife.

In the spring he hired a boy and a plow and horse to cultivate the land. He kept himself on a tight budget, but this was a small expense. He hoed the weeds away from his beans. He eventually traded the beans, which he didn't really like, for rice, which he preferred. He grew potatoes; what he didn't sell he stored in the cellar. He gathered berries for dinner.

Every afternoon he walked into town for company, or to feed his thoughts. He enjoyed hanging out at the local coffeehouse, watching the busyness of others. He met and talked with strangers and strange people. Often his friends invited him to stay for dinner. In the evening he read Homer and wrote in his journal. He stored the journal in the cupboard in his house. Every gesture was economical.

This house wasn't really new; it was someone else's recycled house. After Thoreau and his friends and neighbors framed the walls from trees he felled and squared himself, he sheathed it with boards from a cabin he bought and tore down, like some people buy old cars to salvage for parts. He didn't expect the house to last more than the few years he would live in it. He welcomed birds that perched on it, the pines and sumac that intruded their branches into its cracks, the animals that found shelter under its floor. He himself was merely passing through. The whole enterprise was a proof for a cost-of-living theory.

Walden also represented solitude to Thoreau, a melting away from constant commerce with other people. It allowed him to be again the animal, the natural inhabitant of natural landscape that Man once was before becoming "mod-

ern." It allowed him to do that on his own terms, except when society found him out. Visitors, the curious, the nearby railroad, were constantly breaking the silence he said he sought, yet maybe he didn't really want solitude. He seemed to enjoy the opportunity to give advice, solve his neighbor's problems. These were usually daytime intrusions. At night he found the quiet of the forest, the stars in a clear sky, and he was there to see it or read or sleep in it.

I too plan my house in a forest, and think about how it should look and what it can offer. Like Thoreau's, it must be simple, easy to clean, furnished with only useful objects, and no larger than it needs to be for one or two elderly women. I also keep a journal and grow vegetables. Unlike Thoreau's experiment, though, there will be visiting grandchildren, friends who will want to spend more than a few nights, possibly other writers who will come and stay for a week or two.

How big must a house be is the question, rather than how small can one build it. A home, for me, must be more than the minimalist shelter Thoreau was using as an example. We are no longer satisfied, as women, to read only Homer. Shelves will be needed for many books, space for a computer, a kitchen for putting up food that will be stored in the cellar. Cornmeal cakes and a handful of berries will not be a sufficient diet throughout the years we hope to live. Thoreau has led the way, and we make our own adaptations.

The house must last many years without requiring major upkeep or repairs. It must not be a drain on limited resources. Though it may be built of wood, it must with-

stand forest fires. It must blend into a landscape at once natural and artificial, for even this mature-looking forest of majestic fir trees is second- or third-growth. Mushroom hunters, loggers, surveyors, the teenagers down the road, all leave evidence of their use of its resources.

I will dig out a small pond that will be fed by rainwater. Frogs will come and I may add a few fish. Over the years the pond will look like a natural element in the re-naturalized, constructed landscape.

The thought of living in a little house in the woods like Thoreau did makes it seem possible, less a dream. I imagine how I could embrace the quiet totally, live without the interruptions of alarm clocks and diurnal schedules, become somewhat of a hermit, an eccentric old woman who talks to her cat and listens to the winter wren. Would the townspeople call me a philosopher? More likely they'd think of me as a witch.

The trees and the sun, in my plans, will be invited indoors, as at Walden, but through insulated windows. An energy-efficient wood stove will provide warmth in the center of this home. The ridgepole of the (fireproof) roof will be a perch for owls. The (spacious) porch will be a place to work, or eat, or read protected from rain. I too will be proving the economy of sustainable living, of growing onions and potatoes, picking wild blackberries. Like Thoreau, I'll spend my afternoons in town drinking coffee and talking to strangers, giving out advice. When they ask where I live, I'll say "Back there, in the woods, by a pond."

---

*How big must a house be  
is the question, rather than how small  
one can build it. A home, for me, must be  
more than the minimalist shelter  
Thoreau was using as an example.*

---



Duncan Adams

## Bones

I mailed my brother, Bill, detailed instructions for my funeral. Weeks passed. He did not write. He did not phone. Finally, from my rented house in Montana, where I lived alone, I dialed his home in Roanoke, Virginia.

"So, what did you think of the suggestions I sent you about my funeral?" I asked.

"I thought it was pretty damn morbid," he replied. "I don't really understand what you're up to."

Neither did I. I simply knew that during my first few months in Montana, death had become more real, more tangible. I encountered it regularly.

Bushwhacking through red-willow tangles along Tenmile Creek one spring day, I stumbled upon a spray of big bones. They were scattered in all directions along the narrow, sinuous creek—femurs and ribs and vertebrae. Although leathery sinew still clung to some pieces at various joints and junctures, most of the bones were clean and white. A large flat specimen, which I took to be a scapula, resembled the blade of a canoe paddle. These bones once supported the bulk and guts of a big animal, an elk or a moose. I wondered what had killed it.

From simple contemplation alone, my pulse quickened. Hair hackled on my neck. I scanned the brush ahead and then turned to confront the rise—high ground with tall pines and squat rock from which a cougar might spring. But only the wind moved through the lodgepoles, which moaned and swayed like mourners. Relieved, I turned back to the creek and, hoping for antlers, searched a while longer, finding at the edge of the creek the skull of a female, the jawbone still attached.

In the creek's tight, deep gully I felt suddenly claustrophobic and vulnerable. On hands and knees I climbed to the top of the rise and welcomed the breeze blowing there. A game trail led to a high meadow, where the warm sun invited a meditative pause. Propped against my backpack, glancing around, I spotted beneath a nearby sagebrush a heap of matchstick-size bones. I shifted over and picked through them.

Must have been a ground squirrel, I thought. Probably a Columbian ground squirrel, a ubiquitous Rocky Mountain rodent many Westerners call gophers. Fathers and sons go gopher hunting. With a cold bottle of beer pinched between their thighs, they shoot sometimes while leaning from the windows of pickup trucks. They whoop when their bullets score; they leave the dead, dying or crippled gophers and drive on. The carcasses feed coyotes and magpies and ravens.

On this day in early spring the ground squirrels remained cloistered in underground burrows, where they spend up to seven months of each year. You can't blame them, really. In addition to hunters armed with rifles they must contend regularly with hawks, eagles, coyotes and owls. Their anxiety is palpable. They scurry and peep; they stand between each nibble of grass to scan for death's approach; they run for cover at the

passing shadow of the slightest cloud. Philosophers contend we humans are unique because of our awareness of death's inevitability. They should study ground squirrels.

I moved to Anaconda, Montana, in April 1990, to take a reporting job with *The Montana Standard*, a daily newspaper based in Butte. Back in Massachusetts I'd left a job at *The Somerville Journal*, a weekly newspaper where I'd been the assistant editor. In Somerville, a densely-populated, rough-and-tumble, blue-collar suburb of Boston, death remained largely invisible. Each week, I'd read the police logs and find accounts there of deaths from natural causes, deaths from suicides, deaths from automobile accidents. These bodies disappeared discreetly, re-emerging miraculously in funeral parlors. There was the occasional murder or other similarly newsworthy demise, but even from these more notorious corpses little physical residue remained at the scene—a puddle of blood, perhaps, or a tiny scarlet bit of flesh, or the spray-painted, paper-doll outline of the victim.

In Anaconda, people I met asked, "So, what brought you all they way here from Massachusetts?" Before responding, I'd study their faces, wondering whether they could handle the full and complicated truth.

I believe it was Linus in the *Peanuts* comic strip who, rebutting conventional wisdom, said, "There is no problem so big you can't run away from it." In the late summer of 1987, feeling overwhelmed by looming decisions about both love and work, I decided to run, choosing a temporary flight from Somerville, opting for the quintessential American curative—a cross-country road trip. I elected to travel alone, a decision that initially intensified the feelings of anger and doubt experienced regularly enough already by my girlfriend, K., whose patience with my chronic and brooding ambivalence was wafer-thin. But by my departure date—Labor Day—K. had rallied enough to kiss me goodbye with a passion so fierce our teeth scraped. She waved as I started my pickup and drove away, headed west, feeling freedom throbbing and pulsing.

At the ranger station at Old Faithful there was no wait for backcountry permits. The ranger seemed glad to see me. I'd spent the previous night—my first in Yellowstone National Park—in my tent, surrounded by RVs at a numbered site in an official campground at Lewis Lake. Through their checkered curtains I saw my neighbors silhouetted by the soft glow of TVs.

"Before I issue a permit, you'll need to watch a brief film about bears," the ranger said. "And here are a couple of brochures to take with you." One such flyer, titled "Grizzly Country—Bear Us in Mind," advised: "Bears don't like surprises...If a grizzly bear does charge, your options are: drop a pack or coat to distract the bear; climb at least 12 feet up a stout tree; as a last resort, assume a 'cannonball' position to protect your head and stomach while playing dead....Because grizzlies can attain short bursts of speeds up to 40 mph, running away is a poor option."



I sat in the ranger's trailer and watched footage of a large grizzly, its muzzle red with gore, rending the carcass of a bull bison. Just as my resolve to camp in Yellowstone's backcountry began to waver, the ranger tore the permit from his book and handed it over. He recommended a four-mile hike in to Mallard Lake. "You're in luck. No one else is up there. You'll have it to yourself."

Before leaving, affecting nonchalance, I asked, "So, there probably aren't many bears around Mallard Lake, huh?"

"The bears can be anywhere in the Park. I guess I should tell you that two weeks ago a camper's tent was torn up at Mallard Lake while he was away from the campsite. We never determined whether a bear or a vandal was responsible."

"I see. Well, thanks."

"Sure. Have a good time."

I parked near the trailhead and gathered gear, packing extra rope to hang my backpack and food from "bear poles" at the site, including extra batteries for my flashlight. Around noon I shouldered the frame pack and started walking. An elderly couple passed, close enough for eavesdropping, and the old man's whisper carried on the breeze, "He's going alone."

I stopped to register at the trailhead ledger. A few hundred yards later, the trail passed through dense stands of lodgepole pines. I noticed most of the spindly trees lacked lower limbs. Support seemed marginal for a desperate ascent. The forest was still. The quiet and my jangling nerves combined to amplify the faintest sound. More than once I jumped in response to a chipmunk's rustle.

I moved steadily upward along graduated switchbacks. At one bend in the trail, a section thick with beargrass, some large animal had bedded down. An elk? A bison? A grizzly? There were no tracks, pellets or scat, at least none I could recognize, being a greenhorn Easterner then, having never backpacked overnight in the West or even day-hiked in grizzly country.

Around 1 p.m., I reached Mallard Lake, a small mountain lake, pitched the tent and then sat facing the water, my back to the woods. The ranger had been right. No one occupied the other lakeside campsites.

I watched raucous wood ducks, like cub pilots earning their wings, repeatedly taking off and landing on the lake. I watched a pair of Western grebes submerging to feed. I timed the duration of three separate dives, counting 17 seconds, 17 seconds, 19 seconds. They dove together and resurfaced almost simultaneously, exchanging short, rowdy "quacks," as if to say, "God, that's good!" or "Man, it sure is cold!"

My mind wandered. On this journey cross-country I sought clarity, having reached at least two internal crossroads. For seven years I had worked as a psychotherapist and was on a leave-of-absence from a doctoral program in clinical psychology. I'd grown weary of psychology's relentless introspection. A book review I read one day heightened the ambivalence. The

reviewer observed that the life of the book's author, a practitioner of psychoanalysis, had been "intensely scrutinized but not intensely lived." The phrase haunted me.

And for the past two years I'd been involved with K., who was beginning to wonder aloud about my long-term plans for the relationship. During the weeks preceding my departure, she'd made me suffer emotionally for the freedom anticipated, berating me for being irresponsible, immature, noncommittal. When angry, K.'s black eyes glittered as though alive with starlight. Far worse were the alternating periods of K.'s withdrawal, of her enervated and contagious resignation, when all the light left her eyes and the skin beneath them sagged and turned dark. These times intensified most my longing for escape.

But that very morning in Yellowstone I'd discovered hidden in my backpack a loving note from K. In it she described her deep wishes that this trip would bring me joy and then bring me back. On the shore of Mallard Lake I fished the now sweat-stained note from a pocket, read it again, and felt hope stirring that she and I might find a way to breathe new life into our relationship.

A shrill bleating startled me. I turned and saw scurrying across a talus pile an oddly comical little animal I later learned was a pika, a

cousin of hares and rabbits. The pika, also known as the "whistling hare," is said to be something of a ventriloquist. As I observed its antics and, most especially, its alert wariness, I remembered grizzlies.

I knew the odds were in my favor. At the time of my timorous foray, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, an area of 28,000 square miles, probably harbored about 300 grizzlies. Today, officials estimate that the chance of being injured by a bear in Yellowstone National Park is approximately one in 2.1 million. Since 1970, grizzlies in Yellowstone have injured 29 people and killed three. Black bears have injured 42. From 1980 through 1993, more than 35 million people visited Yellowstone. In Glacier National Park, bears have killed only nine people since the park opened in 1910.

But statistics have never soothed me. I became watchful as darkness crept along the ridgeline, then built a fire and read *The Snow Leopard* by flashlight. Author Peter Matthiessen, trekking along a hazardous path in the Himalayas, decided it wasn't death itself he feared, but the potential manner of the dying. Made sense to me.

Around 8 p.m., unbelievably, the flashlight's beam dimmed and died. Although the batteries were new, the bulb was not. I crawled into the tent's close confines, stretched out, and waited. There was no moon. I could not read my watch. Every sound seemed bearish, but I found especially unnerving the loud trumpeting grunts and eerie whistles I later learned were the mating bugles of rutting bull elk.

I watched the stars move across the sky. Then suddenly, as sleep approached, something crashed into the tent

*Around noon I shouldered the frame pack and started walking. An elderly couple passed, close enough for eavesdropping, and the old man's whispers carried on the breeze, "He's going alone."*



Artwork: C.J. Diegel



directly behind my head. Bolting upright, panic pounding in my chest and ears, I clutched a sharp stake I'd whittled from a lodgepole limb. But nothing happened. Jittery with adrenaline, all hope of sleep abandoned, I curled up in my sleeping bag and prayed for the sun.

Red-eyed at dawn (a time of day subsequent research informed me is among the grizzly's favorites for foraging), I broke camp. I discovered then the source of the impact to the tent the night before; a tent peg had pulled out and, propelled by its elastic cord, had become a small missile.

Leaving Mallard Lake, I packed out something I hadn't packed in—a raw awareness of a tangible, ragged and primal fear. With the exception of war and certain other murderous circumstances, our species is not hunted. We are the stalkers not the stalked. But hiking and camping in grizzly country revives latent memories and dormant capacities. Senses sharpen. Nature reclaims its just dominion. Man becomes what he is, a fragile, delicate, weak-kneed sac of sinew and brittle bone—no real match for the mighty grizzly.

Three weeks later I drove back into Somerville. Tension clouded the reunion with K. My journey and its solitude had provided time and space to clarify career choices. I decided to leave psychology and enroll in journalism at Northeastern University in Boston. But ambivalence remained about my relationship with K.

Two years passed. After estrangements, reconciliations, and unstinting ambivalence, after the death of my mother, after the idyllic marriage of a close friend, I clenched my teeth and proposed marriage. K. accepted. Almost immediately I plunged into a profound depression. In retrospect, I realize my

proposal was akin to the flawed but well-meaning interventions pursued by the Army Corps of Engineers in seeking to "improve" meandering rivers, employing great earth-moving machines to force them into tidy, straight channels. Eventually, the rivers find again their own eccentric course, following the landscape's natural contours.

In January of 1990, I ended the engagement. Three reeling months later, having been seduced by Montana during my travels in 1987, I moved to Anaconda. Miraculously, I spent my last night in Somerville with K. In the morning, clad in her flannel nightshirt, she stood at the threshold of her apartment, behind the storm door, and waved farewell. From the curb I could not see whether her face showed anguish, relief or anger. But what I knew for certain was that resignation no longer distorted her beautiful features. That was more than six years ago. I haven't seen her since.

During my first five months in Anaconda, a time of loneliness, solitude, contemplation, and retreat, I rarely ventured east of the Continental Divide's comforting fortress. Whenever I did, such as the day I hiked along Tenmile Creek, east of Mount Evans in the Anaconda-Pintler Range of the Rocky Mountains, I felt vulnerable, uneasy, exposed. The bones I found unnerved me. On bushwhacking hikes—the kind I prefer—no one knew my whereabouts. If something happened, they'd have to find the truck first and then fan out, looking for ravens. At the least, I thought, my brother should know my wishes for consecrating the scattered remains.

During the years that followed my initial trip to Yellowstone and that fledgling foray into truly wild country, I discov-



ered there is something exhilarating about hiking through territory shared with a superior predator. Ordinary fears fade, seeming even more neurotic than usual, and are replaced by a more muscular, elemental and intoxicating variety.

In October 1992, I shared grizzly lore with a visiting friend from Virginia, Cynthia Perkins, as we hiked to Avalanche Lake in Glacier National Park. Although Cynthia seemed unperturbed, I was nervous. A few days before, an experienced, 40-year-old backpacker from Wisconsin had been killed and partially consumed by a female grizzly in the park.

Cynthia's anxiety was much more apparent a month later when a magistrate in Harrisonburg, Virginia, married us. But I felt calm, free of doubt, liberated from the jitters about monogamy and commitment that had helped sabotage my relationship with K.

Seven months later, Cynthia and I encountered our first grizzly, practically face to fur on the Swiftcurrent Pass Trail in Glacier. The circumstances were less than ideal. Hiking through heavy vegetation, Cynthia and I approached within 40 feet of the bear before we saw it browsing along the trail. Aside from Cynthia's involuntary scream, our reactions followed the experts advice.

Slowly, we backed away from the bear, avoiding eye contact. We spoke to it in soothing tones. The bear lifted its snout to seek our scents, then moved nonchalantly on. Safely bedded down that night at the Many Glacier Inn, I slept little. This time, fear did not drive my insomnia. Instead, I buzzed and tossed with elation. From this evidence, I concluded later that ther' d been a gradual and previously unconscious shift in my relationship to fear and to the prospect of death itself. I could rejoice and revel in the bear's presence, could fear its power but admire and celebrate it, too. Joy could follow fear and even feed upon it.

Life in rural Montana provides daily encounters with the evidence of mortality. Along Highway 1, the road I drive to Anaconda, carcasses of mule deer, porcupines, elk and other road-killed animals slowly decompose. Montana highway crews, unlike their more genteel and fastidious colleagues in the East, don't bother to remove them. Ravens, magpies, coyotes and other critters do their part. But the bones lay for months. From day to day and week to week, I watch the meat disappear and the hide peel away.

And then there are the road-killed humans. At more than 145,000 square miles, Montana is the fourth largest state—after Alaska, Texas and California—yet it has fewer residents statewide than does the city of Phoenix. Traffic remains light in most places, especially after the tourists head for home on the heels of Labor Day. You can travel for hours on a state highway and pass only a car or two. On some days, a driver would have to strive to collide with another vehicle. Thus, people die in single-car accidents, roll-overs usually, after too little sleep, too many beers, or a moment's inattention at high speed. Because these unfortunate few share the roads with so few others, the odds are good that you or I just may be the first to arrive after a vehicle has flipped and crushed and maimed. Or this is how it seems to me.

I was sure she was dead when I reached the spot where she'd landed, crumpled, limp and bloody in the median strip. She was lying on her left side. Her right arm, which appeared to be almost severed near the elbow, was a gory mess. There was dirt in her ears, her nose, eyes and mouth. Twin streams of blood coursed from her nostrils. She did not move.

I had run to her, my mind and heart racing faster than my feet, past one other limp body and the bent wreckage of the small car that had rolled and thrown them both. My friend, Jina, and others had stopped to tend to the young man who lay only yards away, the heels of his shoes nearly touching the gravel shoulder of the northbound lane of Interstate 15.

When I touched the woman's shoulder, there was a low groan, and then fitful, labored breathing. I felt a rush of emotion, a tangle of relief and fear—relief that life remained and fear that it would slip away before my eyes. Fretfully, I searched my memory for first-aid techniques learned in years past. I knew I must ease her breathing and stanch the desperate flow of blood pouring from her arm.

Gently, I rolled her onto her back, cradling and raising her head until it rested on my knees as I knelt on the cold ground. With one hand, I unbuckled my military-style canvas belt and wrapped and pulled it tight around her right bicep. Her breathing improved. The flow of blood slowed. I knew these interventions were not by-the-book, but I also knew I could not stand idly by and watch her die.

I felt focused, yet the experience was trancelike. I was vaguely aware of trucks and cars stopping, of other motorists sprinting over to offer assistance. Jina came over, leaving for a moment several people who were working feverishly to stoke the young man's fading spark of breath and pulse. She told me calls had been made to Dillon for help.

Jina and I had spent a leisurely morning in Dillon, shopping, having lunch. We had driven down from Butte, thrilled along that brief journey by glimpses of a bald eagle, a golden eagle, numerous hawks, and early signs of spring's resurrection. Around 12:30 p.m., we were homebound, driving north on Interstate 15, when we witnessed the horrific sight of the small white Honda flipping and rolling. I saw one body come cartwheeling out of the car as it rolled—an image I will never forget.

When I cried, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" Jina quietly but firmly advised, "Duncan, calm down. Calm down." As I stopped and bolted from the truck, she reached behind the pickup's seat, pulling white flannel sheets from a laundry bag. Minutes later, we tended as best we could to these two broken people we'd never met, and waited for help.

Fortunately, moments after I reached the young woman, several motorists were beside me. One man, equipped with a first-aid kit, bound the woman's torn arm with a pressure wrap, using for a splint a jack handle donated by another man. He told me to apply pressure to her brachial artery. I felt her pulse there, beating in the hollow of her arm. Meanwhile, a dark-haired woman with a Hispanic accent knelt by the groaning victim's left side, held her hand, and insistently kept her



awake and talking.

Through this dialogue, we learned her name, her age (18), and her hometown. She asked us what had happened. We told her there had been an accident. For some reason, we said, her car had strayed into the median and rolled. We did not tell her how badly her companion was injured. From where she lay, she could not see that a nurse who'd stopped and another motorist had begun performing CPR, rhythmically pumping the young man's chest and covering his mouth with theirs.

Others shed expensive coats of leather and down to warm the victims. The garments wrapped around the injured young woman were quickly and thoroughly soaked with the blood she'd shed so copiously in the first moments after the rollover.

After minutes that seemed like hours, someone yelled, "Here they come!" and we knew help finally was arriving from Dillon, some 15 miles away. A woman with close-cropped hair rushed over with a bright orange knapsack packed with first-aid gear. She moved and spoke with authority, alternately barking out orders to helpers and speaking calmly to the injured young woman, soothing her when she cried out in pain. "Tell us where it hurts," she'd say.

The rescue crew and motorists labored together to load the two stretchers into the ambulance, which soon sped away, sirens screaming. People who had stopped to help lingered. There was something we needed—closure, reassurance—something. Highway Patrol Officer Kelly Mantooth seemed to understand our reluctance to leave. He listened patiently and kindly while we breathlessly recounted our experience of the preceeding hour.

Someone noticed a plastic bottle of water left behind by the ambulance crew. Several of us gathered in a small circle, sharing the water to wash away the blood beginning to dry on our hands. Finally, in clumps of twos and threes, we walked back to our vehicles, strangers again.

As soon as I closed the door to my truck, I began to weep. My tears welled up from an overwhelming flood of feeling—part horror, part sorrow, part relief. And there was another source—the profound recognition of how hard, how automatically, how tenaciously these passing motorists had struggled together in an attempt to deny death's clutch. That, too, is an image I will never forget.

Despite all efforts, the young man died. The young woman was air-lifted to Sokane in "garde"" condition. I hope she has recovered.

I wear my seatbelt now. I carry a first-aid kit in my truck. I think of veterans of combat, of police officers and others who routinely encounter terrible carnage. And I wonder again at life and its mysteries, its bright and brittle course, its incalculable worth. And I understand more fully why we often grieve so deeply when it is gone.

Psychotherapist Irwin Yalom, M.D., wrote, "... (T)here is another way—a long tradition, applicable to psychotherapy—that teaches us that full awareness of death ripens our wisdom and enriches our life...our life, our existence, will always be riveted to death." We can know death intimately, accept, and

even embrace its inevitability without living fearfully, without caving in. We can acknowledge the profound fragility of human life and fight ferociously to maintain it, knowing all the time that someday the pulse will cease and the flesh will fade away.

In a stowaway compartment of my pickup's cab, I still carry the blood-stained belt I cinched around the injured woman's arm. Some might say it's a morbid souvenir. But I see it as one more graphic reminder.

These days, I care little what happens ultimately to my ashes and bones. I focus more on living and breathing and feeling deep within a love for kith and kin, including my 23-month-old son, Will. Unlike my father, who meticulously tracked attendance at funerals as though the measure of a life could be thus calculated, I care less every year about what might transpire at my funeral. Cynthia, if she survives me, can do what she pleases with whatever bits remain. Perhaps she'll find a likely spot to spread them along Tenmile Creek, somewhere east of the Great Divide.



Doug Johnson

## *Roots and Wings: A Bicycle Journey Across the West*

She was big, big enough that I saw her on the road ahead for a hundred yards as I approached, wondering what she had been and wishing it did not have to be this way.

It was a cool morning near Cottage Grove, Oregon. A thin haze of clouds softened my shadow ahead of me as I pedaled my bicycle along the old two-lane. I had been watching fences—split rail, galvanized chain link, barbed wire—and “No Trespassing” signs, some wired to the fences, some tacked to trees, and others painted onto old tires or rocks.

When I pulled up, I saw that the animal on the road was a mama opossum. Opossum I recognized by her pointed face, her strong arms and claws, her handsome yellow-grey coat. Mama I knew because six pups, thrown from her pouch, lay around her in a constellation of death, their eyelids never opened, their skin smooth and tiny hands curled. Blood leaked from their mouths, still wet and bright. The belly of one was split open and pink guts spilled out.

I piled them together under a bush. Their bodies, six palm-sized and one hefty as an infant, were soft and limp. Minutes earlier they had been alive, a family. I sang softly to them, a homemade prayer asking forgiveness and telling them how beautiful they were.

Traveling country roads in the West by bicycle, I grew familiar with such carnage: snakes flattened to leathery road jerky, prairie dogs ruptured and gory, deer twisted and rotting. But during the three spring and summer months I cycled these roads, covering 2,600 miles from Arizona to British Columbia, life was more prominent than death. I traveled alone, but in the company of birds and wildflowers, lizards and trees, cliffs and rivers, clouds and stars.

My trip was not a simple vacation; I pursued an alchemy by which I might be transformed through mixing with powerful elements. While I planned to explore the West—its geography, ecology, and culture—I implicitly set out to explore my own terrain as well. For five busy years in San Francisco, I had dedicated myself to a job in municipal energy conservation, neighborhood activism with California's fledgling Green Party, and, most importantly, partnership with a woman I loved, Fran. I found myself exhausted, and at thirty-five, wondering where things went from here. At junctures in my relationship and job, I broke away. Ongoing hope-filled struggles had not resolved the issues that kept us from each other, and when Fran met someone else the relationship came to a difficult but clear end. Completing a project on urban sustainability, I decided work was not sustaining me; and took an extended leave-of-absence.

I longed for many things: the clarity of open country, the easy pleasure of swimming in rivers on hot days, the intrigue of watching animals living lives right next to mine. From volunteering with local habitat restoration projects, I knew that my focus on buildings and politics and human relationships had left me largely ignorant of Nature. I felt a vital need to exercise my latent senses for observing the details of life around me. My energy had been disproportionately spent on doing, and it was time to try simply being.

My journey began on a hot evening in the first week of May. With two hours of sun left, a group of river runners unloaded me and my bicycle along Arizona Highway 93. I felt alone and remote on the gravel shoulder. To the west, across the southern reaches of the Colorado River, was California desert. To the east, sagebrush stretched to chalky buttes in the distance. And straight ahead to the south, welcoming me to life on the road, was a stiff headwind.

I rode, squinting against grit and cursing each RV wake that shoved me from the edge of the pavement onto the gravel or sucked me out into the lane. With the sun at the horizon, I saw a dirt road and left the highway to find my first campsite. Rolling my bike between bushes across the flat open sand, I was aware of the lack of cover and my vulnerability to belligerents. The wind was still strong. As I set up the tent, I lashed it to my bike to keep it from blowing away like a tumbleweed. It would have rolled a long, long way.

As daylight faded, a glow grew in the north where Las Vegas, burning electricity from nearby Hoover Dam, lit up the night like a giant sparkler. I thought about the price we are likely to pay for commandeering Nature on such a grand scale, and for such dubious ends. Disregarding the river's rightful place in this desert seemed like a sure path to silted reservoirs and silted spirits as well. As an old Idaho man named Norman would tell me through tobacco-stained teeth, “Man is sawing off the branch behind himself.”

The morning dawned cool and still, and traffic was lighter as I continued south on 93, marveling at the display of purple, white, yellow, orange and red wildflowers on the shoulder. Except for the poppies I had no idea what they were. It had been a hundred-year spring, the heavy but gentle rains bringing out all that the soil's seed bank had to offer. Mixed in with the wildflowers were beer cans, butane lighters, fast food packaging, shredded tires, solitary work gloves, T-shirts, and plastic soda bottles half-filled with urine. Low symmetric ant-hills spread between the bushes, surfaced with uniform grains of sand and sometimes six feet across. I enjoyed the feel of the road, shifting gears in response to subtle changes in slope, wind, and road surface, changes that would have been imperceptible in a car.

I stopped to eat an orange. My route was largely unplanned; this was to be a wandering, a ramble. From my map, I saw that Highway 93 was the main artery between Phoenix and Las Vegas, accounting for the aggravating traffic. Another route was possible, following a small road 18 miles northeast toward its dead end at Lake Mead, then splitting off onto a dirt road running thirty miles southeast to Route 66. I weighed the tingling attraction of the unknown against the extra distance and the dubious surface of the “unimproved road.”

Several miles ahead I turned off the highway, immediately feeling a difference in the road. Its builders left the land's contours intact, and I rose and fell over low swells. Cars were infrequent and in no hurry. Their drivers usually lifted a finger or two from the steering wheel in greeting. Past the tiny outpost of Dolan Springs, the road stretched straight and rolled slightly downward. Yellow stripes faded into the grey pebbly pavement, and tarred cracks ran in jagged patterns. Feeling the boost of a soft tailwind, I spread my arms, and with my back as a sail rolled fast and singing through a sparse desert forest of Joshua trees, as if the road like a taut string pulled me toward the horizon.

Electric transmission towers shaped like kachina dolls marched in a line across the plains, and powerlines crackled as I passed under them, like strings of plastic pennants at a used car lot snapping in the wind. At one end of the wires were our cities, and at the other, plugged rivers and earth-burning power plants.



I reached the dirt road which branched off to the right and paralleled the Grand Wash Cliffs. Sedimentation streaked the cliffs horizontally in reds, tans, oranges, and greys; erosion-carved bluffs and gullies streaked them vertically. A layer of dramatic clouds floated beyond the cliffs, sharply white against blue sky above, purple and raining into grey sky below. The road was plenty hard for riding, but seriously washboarded. I crossed back and forth aiming for the least ridged patches. My bike rattled with the vibration, and my wrists grew tired. When I stopped and stood on solid ground, the world was exquisitely still. Cattle lowed faintly somewhere off in the mesquite scrub, and tall golden bunchgrass rustled softly in the breeze. I could feel the momentum of the city, like a flywheel inside me, begin to spin down. My psyche was reconfiguring around curiosity, simplicity, and self-sufficiency.

I made camp early. The tranquility of the open plain was soothing, although I harbored a low-level anxiety about the cattle. Not far back I had passed some up close; they were startlingly large and their horns looked sharp. Could they see my tent in the dark? Might they spook in a thunderstorm and run crashing through the bushes? City-boy worries for sure, but my imagination dwells on such things (as a boy I feared shark attack—in swimming pools!). I pitched my tent against a row of bushes and laid my bicycle and assorted goods around the exposed sides. As a creative touch, I arranged two bungee cords to look like snakes.

During the next weeks I experienced similar night-time fears of coyotes, scorpions, javalinas, and rattlesnakes, especially when sleeping without the tent. I thought too about the animal I judged most dangerous, the human male, when discarded beer containers told me I was near a drinking spot. But during three months of sleeping outside I experienced no threats other than high winds and low temperatures. The night became a safe place.

This is not to say that there were not animals about. Often coyotes yipped close by as I lay to sleep. In the mornings, bright yellow meadowlarks, common as pennies, sang brightly and followed me, flying from post to post along a fenceline. Pronghorn dashed across hillsides. Ravens passed overhead with whooshing wingbeats. Lizards sunning themselves darted under bushes at the roadside. Surrounded by this burrowing, flying, hunting, mating society rather than by our industrial infrastructure, I began to understand in what sense these beings, with lineages long predating mine, might be my ancestors, and if I listened, my teachers.

Before setting out the next morning, I stowed my gear in the four panniers mounted to racks on the front and rear of my bicycle, trying a new arrangement to improve weight distribution and accessibility. I suspected this was only the beginning of an ongoing reorganization, one that would include not only my gear but my muscles and synapses, vision and passion.

After jolting along the dirt road for two hours, I climbed a rise and joined gracefully-aged Route 66. Rolling on the smooth pavement felt like skating. There were few cars on this remaining section of the old road running between Seligman and Kingman; I-40 now covered the same stretch more directly. A freight train rumbling up the far side of the valley tooted a greeting to me. I muttered a nonseñe tune in time with my breathing: "Gonna get my kicks, on Route Sixty-Six, gonna play hot licks, on Route Sixty-Six, gonna wade 'cross cricks, on Route Sixty-Six, gonna beat the Knicks...."

Route 66 had been an emblem of restlessness, adventure and escape, of new horizons and fresh starts. I had felt that longing to roam the world in search of the perfect place, like a

windborne seed waiting to land in an ideal fertile niche. The frontier fantasy that drew people westward, the dream of finding a paradise that lives as an image in our minds, seemed to flow only partially diminished through my own life.

But most roaming is temporary, I figured. People strike a compromise with their visions of paradise. Even 66, along with its rambling spirit, was also "America's Main Street," coursing through the hearts of growing towns from Chicago to L.A. where settlers were lodging like leaves behind snags in a stream. My own desire to roam seemed to be in some still-unknown relationship with my desire to create a home. In San Francisco, I had known the joys of community and felt in rootedness the potential for a place's well-keeping. Yet I had felt an undeniable, and as near as I could tell, healthy, urge to take wing.

Riding east the next morning I came to the town of Peach Springs. It was already hot. I sat in the shade with a popsicle and studied the map. A dirt road led from Peach Springs twenty miles north into the Grand Canyon, dropping what looked to be four or five thousand feet all the way to the Colorado River itself. It was the only road to the canyon bottom in 270 miles between Lee's Ferry and the back-up from Hoover Dam. Although daunted by the prospect of a grueling ride down and back, I was hooked by a growing taste for discovery. I got permission from the Hualapai tribal headquarters, then rode north.

When I came to the head of Peach Springs Canyon, the pavement ended and the road dropped steeply from the level plateau. Its surface was loose and uneven. Before long I had to stop to rest my wrists, arms and shoulders, and to cool my brakes. This was a real shakedown, and I was reassured that my bicycle was holding up to it. Preparing for the trip, I had spent three days repacking bearings, truing wheels, mounting new tires, adjusting brakes, and tuning the derailleurs to shift smoothly between all 21 gears. On this journey I was mechanic as well as captain, navigator and engine.

The wash, wide as a city block, twined downward between mounting red cliffs. In the stillness I heard a stone fall loose and skitter down the scree. I was in awe of the massive rock cradling me, a feeling familiar from hiking in the Sierra Nevada's alpine valleys deep between granite ridges. In dramatic moments, with sunlight stealing through dark storm clouds, I have thought of those skyward places as the "hall of the mountain king;" this place, sinking down into the warm earth, felt like the "lap of the canyon mother."

I descended through plant communities like those of the lower-elevation Sonoran desert to the south. The wild crooked spears of blooming ocotillo were accentuated by a thin coat of bright green leaves and flaming red-orange tips. *Spring* seemed an apt name for this unfurling season in which life, like a green branch bent aside by winter, was springing back, in which life's very juices were flowing again like a freshwater spring. Wildflowers shimmered in the sunny breeze, and a yellow snake shot across the road in front of me like a grounded arrow. The canyon was alive.

Halfway down, I spotted the campsite that had been described to me and unloaded my gear. The wooden frame of an old ramada offered shade, and I took a short siesta. A male Gambel's quail sat atop a large bush nearby calling patiently. Was he addressing specific females or calling into the void? What if there were no potential mates within hearing distance? I felt lonely, even if my solitude was chosen.

In the early afternoon, I headed down again. The unloaded bicycle felt squirrely, and I rode like a jockey with my body lifted slightly off the bouncing seat, shifting my balance to



weave between treacherous ruts and large stones. Focusing completely on this dance with the terrain, the bicycle felt like an extension of my body.

Abruptly, I skidded to a stop, startled by a figure on the road ahead. A tall grey mule stood firmly planted, facing me from the center of the road. We stared at each other.

Slowly I moved forward a short ways. He stayed put.

I moved again. He brayed menacingly, shuffled several paces down the road, and turned to face me again. In a reasonable voice, I explained, "I would appreciate it if you stepped over into the wash there so I can get by." His ears rotated a little, but he was unswayed. I wished I had apples to offer.

Five minutes later we were still at a stand-off when I heard a car behind me, the first one since town, maneuvering down the steep road. As the car passed I fell in close behind, pedaling hard, and raced past the temporarily displaced mule in the car's dusty wake. Ha! I felt sly and victorious, and amused by the irony of being rescued by a car whose presence otherwise annoyed me.

After descending several more miles, the road intersected the stream from Diamond Springs. With my khaki hat I scooped water over my hot head. Reaching for the light blue bandanna tied to my handle bars, I found it gone. It must have shaken loose, I thought, and hoped I would find it on the way back.

The road gave way to the gravel streambed, and dark rock pressed closer in, narrowing the canyon. I sensed from the flatness and the moist air that this was the bottom. When I rounded a bend and saw the green river, I was stunned. Almost silently, it slid with raw kinetic power past the vertical frame of the motionless rock walls. I could believe the nearly inconceivable, that water had worn a groove a mile deep into rock.

I left my bike on the small beach, and picked my way downriver along a rocky slope. Traversing the slope's contours, my own animal sense led me to faint hints of trail left by the passage of bighorn sheep or maybe the mule. I dropped onto all fours to clamber over boulders and duck through a scratchy bush, enjoying the sensation of using my limbs to negotiate rugged ground after days of riding.

I sat on a jutting rock to watch the canyon. In both directions the river, like my life's flowing passage, disappeared behind bends. Directly below, the river was smooth, swirling into eddies along the shore, but seconds later the same water

thundered over rapids. The scene was elemental: a thick ribbon of water running low over the solid corrugated land, the sun burning in the deep well of sky. I mused on their partnerships. Sun and sky spread water through evaporation and precipitation. Water and sky carve land through erosion. Sun colors the others with its light. Land sometimes erupts into the sky to block sun and freeze water, and sky sometimes stikes the land

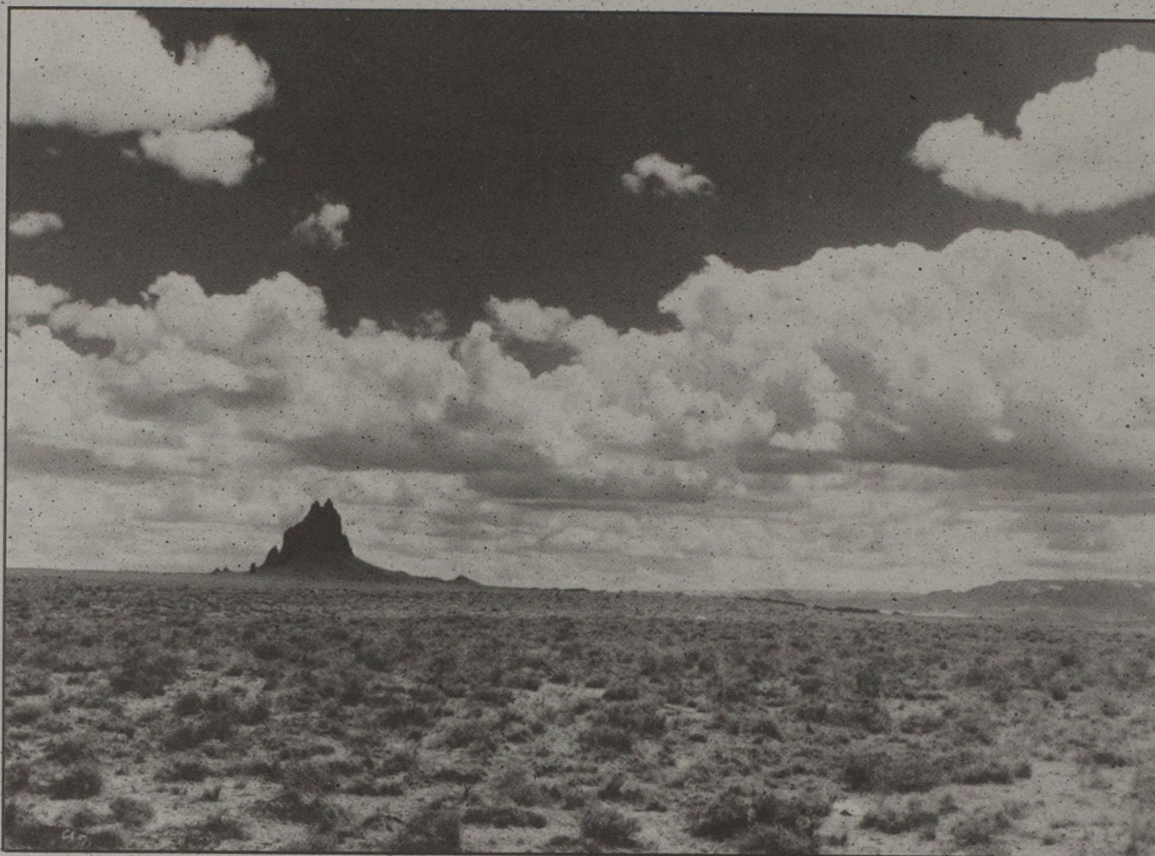


Photo: Jeff Edmonds

with charged lightning.

In a privileged niche between these elements exists life, swimming in water, rooted in or walking on the land's skin. We are filled with water and sky; our lives fueled by the sun. Our substance, the substance of all plants and animals, is a collaborative medley of these elements. Australian forest activist John Seed puts it well: "We are the rocks dancing."

I watched and listened to birds. A grackle, glossy and black, swooped around the beach looking for tidbits left by rafters, his long tail rotating as a rudder. The notes of canyon wrens singing from perches high above fell like drops from damp mossy grottos. Swifts darted over the first rim, sometimes clasping each other to mate in midair as they tumbled earthward.

When the afternoon sun had sunk low, etching the eastern cliffs with a sharp line of shadow, I reluctantly turned my attention to the task of climbing back to camp. I churned through the gravelly narrows, and emerged into the expansive side canyon. The air was blessedly cool. I strained in my lowest gear, standing hard on the pedals and wrestling the handlebars to keep the bike on the firmest part of the sketchy road. My lungs, pumping like bellows, found a comfortable rhythm. I crawled steadily up the grade.

A sweaty half-hour past Diamond Springs, I looked up and groaned. There he was, my friend the mule, again planted in the road ahead of me. Now how was I going to race past him uphill?



But rather than dig in for a showdown to settle the score, he turned and trotted up the road, disappearing over the next rise. Approaching the spot where he had stood, I saw something lying on the ground—my blue bandanna! I laughed. Had he brought it, or was he simply inspecting it?

Just ahead I came upon him waiting in the wash off the road. For the next two miles he paralleled me, sometimes running ahead out of sight, then waiting for me to catch up before turning to run again. Probably, I thought, he is escorting me out of his territory, but maybe he is playing with me. My proportions on the bike were similar to his, and unlike the motor vehicles that occasionally toiled down the road, I was obviously a living critter. I whistled and sang songs, hoping he liked my company. I appreciated his. Independence and self-sufficiency, curiosity and playfulness seemed to be traits we had in common.

Then for an hour I climbed without seeing him. The car that passed me earlier approached on its way up. Pulling alongside, the woman leaned out. "You drop this?" She held out my crumpled khaki hat, which I had tucked under a bungee cord—securely I thought—before starting the sunless ride back. My buddy, it seemed, had a knack for charming sweaty garments right off my bicycle. The ones on my body might be next. Coyote may be the trickster, but this mule's capacity for mischief was impressing me.

The first stars were out when I finally returned to camp. While I ate dinner, an owl called and bats flew crazy circles against the indigo sky. I sat still a long time, pleasantly tired. I tried to remember how to calculate temperature from the rate of crickets chirruping.

When I got to my feet, half-asleep, to roll out my sleeping bag, the canyon had stilled under pale moonlight. Almost as if dreaming, I saw him again, emerging from the bushes onto the road. He lowered his nose to the ground, inspecting my tracks I supposed, before walking slowly back down his canyon.

Heading north to Utah a week later, I hitched a ride to avoid a windy, narrow stretch that was notorious for drunk driving accidents. Watching buttes slide by from the bed of the pick-up, the speed and lack of physical exertion made me uneasy. The smooth ride felt almost sinister, like that of a magic carpet which could seduce me into forgetting my body and its need to walk, breathe and work. I was saddened to not smell or hear the land we crossed. It had gone from a landscape I could stop and touch to a movie racing by, from a continuous, shifting flow of habitats to discrete images.

I got let off a few miles shy of Page, near the Arizona border. Ahead the land spread downward toward the huge tentacled expanse of Lake Powell (or "Lake Foul" as one woman referred to it), the huge reservoir formed by Glen Canyon Dam. Late afternoon sunlight from low in the west stole through purple-grey clouds to ignite the earth's fiery oranges and reds. The colors were striking, but the murky water filling the canyon made the scene garish, like the glow of a sunset cast in rich hues by a toxic layer of smog. In the midst of such natural aridity, this body of water was grotesquely artificial. I wished it were not so, but I too was relying on such engineering-provided water.

Crossing into Utah the next day, I felt ready to strike out into the wilds. During short stays in Flagstaff and Prescott I had felt whirled around, off balance, out of touch with who and what I was. It was unsettling to be around people on busy schedules, leading "normal" lives much as I had until recently. I was agitated by supermarkets, traffic signals, and newspapers. By most of life going on inside buildings. Already the outdoors,

the vocation of riding my bike across open land under a temperamental sky, had become home. I felt like I had stepped into, not out of, the "real" world.

Looking at my maps, I chose a dirt road heading east towards the Escalante River. The course would put me into remote country, three days ride from pavement and the next town, and I hoped to stay out longer, with the intention of spending more days exploring. Steering up the middle of the state, I hoped to avoid other tourists that mostly flood into Zion and Bryce National Parks to the west, and Moab, Mecca of slickrock mountain biking, to the east. (Southern Utah's popularity is growing fast: a bumper sticker I saw in Berkeley read "London Paris New York Moab.")

I left the freshly paved two-lane for an unmarked crusty track heading east along the base of convoluted buttes. I concentrated on staying out of sandy soft spots, avoiding sharp rocks, and shifting gears quickly as I climbed small but steep knolls and dropped into washes. What little vegetation there was clung low to the sands. The sands themselves were colorful: grey ashen mounds, a layer of brick-red gravel, yellow and tan rubble sloping up to the disintegrating vertical buttes.

I rode for several sweaty hours under the hot sun, seeing nobody. Then, around a corner, the road came to a sheer wall. Tired and disgruntled, I examined where the road somehow climbed the face, snaking around precipitous crags and across crumbly hollows. From my map I saw that this climb vaulted me onto the Kaiparowits Plateau. I sat down and studied tiny yellow wildflowers, then ate raisins and an orange. I looked at the sky for a while. I drank more water. I rubbed a turquoise disk I had bought the day before, now hanging around my neck as a talisman. Finally, remembering how the water in the Colorado flowed through both eddies and rapids, trying to convince myself that a task's difficulty was poor grounds for resisting it, especially if it were inevitable, I got on my bicycle.

The grade was severe. The road was too narrow and uneven for me to zig-zag, so I pedaled straight up it, pumping ten or twenty strokes before stopping to rest my burning legs and lungs. While I leaned on my handlebars, panting, I peered into the shadowed recesses of secret box canyons below. Gnats reconvened around my head each time I stopped. After a minute or two, I set my sights on the next stopping point—top of that switchback, or just past that rockslide.

I felt lonely, thinking, nobody knows where I am. Sometimes this was exciting; now it was heartbreaking. Sadness at parting with Fran welled up, feeling more intense and pure than it had while we were separating. I felt our tragedy, how our passions so often trapped us each in our own dark corner. My breathing was deep and ragged, and the exertion of my chest, filling and emptying, was cathartic like sobbing. My fear about of being alone in this remote country aroused my fear of being alone in the world without a mate. These feelings I accepted, if not entirely welcomed. They existed, and I preferred to face them head on. Without having fully known it, the need to feel such things, to clean out wounds and losses, was part of the reason I had come.

Like all climbs, no matter how seemingly interminable, this one finally ended. As I crested the final switchback and rolled onto the level plateau, I did not feel jubilant, only grateful. The sun had set and the light was softening into evening. Just back from the precipice I set up camp, staring at the country spread wide to the west and south. Mormon pioneers had crossed this land without roads, plastic water jugs, or lightweight tents, a thought that made me less concerned for my own difficulties. Faint but unmistakable in the distance,



four skyscraper-tall smoke stacks marked the coal-burning power plant at Page.

On many levels I had traveled far that day. Fittingly, travel and travail originate from the same root. I found in the psychological rigors of travel a form of spiritual testing. Discomfort is not to be romanticized, but it seemed on my trip frequently to be the price, and sometimes the creator, of important experiences. I carry such experiences with me now like worn, beautiful stones. They guide me in troubling and challenging situations, reminding me that discomfort is to be expected on the truest path.

The next day was windless and hot. To get to the Escalante drainage, my map showed a direct route cutting down off the east side of the plateau on a road called Left Hand Collet, and a much longer route that looped north to end run the Fifty-Mile Cliffs, then backtracked south. I set out to cover what looked from my topo map to be thirty-five fairly flat miles east across the plateau to the intersection with Left Hand Collet.

The road neither gained nor lost significant altitude, but it was anything but flat. Crossing wash after wash, I jolted down rocky winding descents, struggled through sand at the bottom, then strained to climb the far side, pulling up on the handlebars to maintain rear-wheel traction. A film of dust coated my sweaty skin. I had planned for two liters of water a day; by mid-afternoon I was into my third.

With late sunlight casting rock outcroppings in sharp relief, I stopped to inspect a faint unmarked side road to the right that looked like it might be the turn-off. The map showed Left Hand Collet in even shorter dashes than the road

I had been riding on, meaning that it could barely be called a road at all. I pored over the map, looking for some conclusive detail of topography that would tell me that this was or was not the turn.

When I got to the point of comparing the angle at which the roads parted to that shown on the map, I knew I was clutching straws. The only way to find out was to try the road. But if it was just a jeep track, the country it led into stretched empty all the way to the upper reaches of Lake Powell. This was not country to get lost in, at least not without good provisions.

There was no one to consult but myself. I turned south towards what I hoped was Left Hand Collet.

Before my worries had much chance to grow, the road jerked left behind a clump of junipers and fell sharply into a trough. I slid down sand-covered stone with brakes locked, sitting far back to keep from pitching forward over the handlebars, then bounced over big humps and plunges. I could not stop. The road surface was solid rock, and the drop from its edge into the deepening canyon was steep; I would be hurt badly if I took any falls. Fear focused my senses onto reading the surfaces immediately in front of me and shifting my balance to control the bicycle. I descended this cataract of a road like a drunk wildcat bounding down from ledge to ledge, my tires seemingly off the ground as much as on.

When I found a place level enough to stop, I hollered with adrenalin. I had at times sought out daring stunts that scared me silly—diving off a bridge, climbing a tall tree—but this had caught me by surprise. Half-believing I might never get another chance, I ate my last brownie. I hoped this was indeed Left Hand Collet, or at least that it went somewhere I could go

on from, because I would never get back up this incline.

Soon the slope mellowed and the worst of the descent was over. I felt cleaned out, my mind cleared of extraneous thoughts by the intensity of working to stay alive. The road crossed in and out of the dry stream bed, sometimes through deep pools of sand where I had to walk.

Where the canyon merged with another from the side, I found a treasure. A shallow trickling stream laughed across smooth gravel, unexpected after two days of dry washes. Feeling blessed, I dipped my hands in and splashed delicious cool water onto my face. For a moment, I felt I had never really seen water before, never noticed the miracle of its very liquidity. A substance clear, neutral and permeating like air, commonplace, yet in its colors, its droplets and waves, as beautiful as the rarest gemstone. And so utterly essential to us, in body but also in spirit.

The canyon was still. Chattering jays only accentuated the calm. Small tracks, maybe those of kangaroo mice, dotted the damp sand. I sat watching the sky above the canyon walls shade toward nightfall. I stretched, drank water, and relaxed into the moment. Nothing had to be done or even thought about.

I ate and slept that night high above the confluence of the steambeds, on a sandstone ledge. I looked out over a bowl of land holding the rivulet below. It was a good place for living things, and I felt like a guest in a quiet but lively community. The ledge itself, although no larger than my body and edged by a precipitous drop, was flat and snug under an overhang, and it felt secure.

As I lay watching stars come out, time seemed to soften with the fading light, as if the past and future were spiraling near. Who had stayed on this ledge before? I wondered about the lives of those who have lived for so

many generations in this land I now inhabit

too. I imagined those lives, and those of my blood ancestors from Europe, and felt tied to them both. I slept lightly, waking often to a moon a little farther along its path. A breeze whispered against the rock, asking after those who used to live here.

By the time the sun neared its zenith the next day, I had indeed made the Escalante drainage. I made camp near an area where my map showed two slot canyons with promising names, Peekaboo and Spooky Gulches, and set off on foot to find them. The sun was intense, broiling through my hat and white shirt. I traversed a rounded basin, the stone textured as if it had been smoothed out with a giant spatula like so much orange cake icing. The sculpted rock, blooming wildflowers, and layered cliffs once laid grain by grain in an ancient sea, all reflected the creative hand of water, which itself was nowhere to be seen.

I spotted the channeled beginnings of a slot and headed towards it, crossing the vast surface of slickrock that funneled rainfall into this chute during a storm. Following a slim band of sand between rising walls, I touched smooth stone on both sides with my hands as I walked. The pink stone, interrupted only by green medallions of lichen and a dark pebbly stripe like a layer of peanut brickle, swept in elegant curves that reflected the swirls of rushing currents. Trapped stones sat, still for the moment, in the deep potholes dug by their tumbling. The slot was soon thirty feet deep and the sky reduced

---

*In a privileged niche between  
these elements exists life, swimming in water,  
rooted in or walking on the land's skin. We are filled  
with water and sky, our lives  
fueled by the sun.*

---



to a twisted strip of blue. I stopped to look at a pair of lizards, orange and yellow offset with black, on the sand in front of me. They never moved, even when I passed within a foot of them. Grains of sand stirred by a breeze in the world above sprinkled onto my shoulders. The cool thick air chilled my sweaty skin.

Strange noises echoed from around the bend, but stopped when I stopped; they were mine. Diffuse light glowed from the stone. Mosquito hawks droned by, dragging their long legs like rope ladders from dirigibles. The sandy floor disappeared, and the sides of the slot drew closer and joined to form an uneven bottom. I climbed and ducked and squeezed and spun—flowing, as if the water in my cells was responding to the intimate knowledge of fluid motion held in the stone surrounding me.

Absorbed, I emerged from the slot where it spilled out into a broad wash. The sky spread unnervingly wide and the brilliant sun struck hot on my skin.

I sprawled in the shade of a juniper, licking salt from my upper lip. Leaves on the tall cottonwood nearby rustled in a puff of wind. Bright colors dotted the sands of the wash: orange globe mallow bobbing on their stems, long yellow prince's plumes, delicate mariposa lilies with three buttery petals deepening to red inside, purple darts of larkspur. A patch of prickly pear sported twenty vibrantly pink rosettes, with a wealth of buds ready to open.

I drank long draughts from my water bottle. At markets along the way I had scavenged discarded plastic Gatorade containers, and now carried twelve liters of water—weighing about 25 pounds—in bottles strung along a cord that hung over the tent and sleeping bag on the back of my bicycle.

A voice surprised me. A small grey-haired woman, in her sixties at least, came walking slowly down the wash. She was thrilled that I had come by bicycle, and gave me a small bottle of orange juice, still cold from the cooler in her car. The juice tasted bitingly sharp and sweet after days of drinking only warm water. Similarly, after days alone with rocks and lizards and sky, the intensity of looking at her face was almost overwhelming. While she told me names of flowers, I watched her lively eyes and the lines creasing her cheeks. She told me that the slot through which I had walked was neither of the ones on my map—those were farther down. This one, then, was No Name Gulch, or Two Lizards Gulch, a finer place for its anonymity.

Walking back to camp, I thought about the hundreds of strangers I passed each day in San Francisco. Did each of those faces hold so much? Was it sheer numbers that taught me to filter out all but the most obvious and useful information to be read on those countenances? I stopped to stand in a patch of knee-high sunflowers. They danced in the breeze and smiled up at me.

Days later and miles east, I made camp at sunset on a ridge overlooking the Waterpocket Fold, a long ripple of land where layers of the planet's buckled crust had been exposed by erosion. Wheeling my bike across shale-littered ground, I meandered through large scratchy bushes until the dirt road was no longer in sight. I had the world to myself, invisible to all but the creepy satellites scanning the Earth's surface with ever-increasing resolution. With a chill wind blowing, I enjoyed the still retreat of my tent and the warmth of my sleeping bag.

In the morning, I explored the area around my camp, finding a small cactus with two bright red flowers, a dead bush with limbs weathered silver and gnarled like antlers, and a small level spot beyond which the ridge began to slope down in earnest. I sat on a rock with a grand view over the Waterpocket Fold and the Henry Mountains beyond. Ants crawled over my

bare feet, tickling. I marveled at their tiny complexity in contrast to the huge rock landscape spread before me. The range of scale spanning from atoms to galaxies seemed unfathomable.

The morning sun climbed higher into a cool but clear sky. I draped my damp clothes on a bush to dry, then lay flat on a tarp to soak up sunshine. The warmth felt exquisite on my skin, especially when returning after brief absences due to rogue clouds sailing over the ridge to block the sun. Along my backside, I felt the points where the ground held up my body. A fly buzzed around my legs, and I dozed.

Finally, I decided it was time to move on, and got up lazily to dress and pack. As clouds passed, I watched my sharp shadow, like a fellow being beside me, disappear, then blink back beside me seconds later. I put on shorts, tee shirt and sandals, and rolled my tent. As I buckled the last straps on my panniers, several white pellets bounced off the black fabric. Astonished, I looked up to see a dense bank of stormclouds cruising low over the ridge. I hurriedly pulled on my jacket while hail fell as if dumped from a giant bucket, landing on my toes and bouncing crazily on the red shale until it was covered in clean white. Such moods, this sky!

When the hail stopped, it was again cold, so I donned thermal underwear and rain gear. The sky held steady as I rode switchbacks down the great lifted slab of the Waterpocket Fold, but when I reached the dirt road running along the east side of the formation, a gentle rain began to fall. The dirt turned quickly to soft sticky mud that caked my tires, coated my chain and gears, and encased my brakes in baseball-sized gobs. I was unable to ride or even push my bicycle. This annoyed me. I had set my sights on riding a good ways north that afternoon, and had thought the sun was back. Still, I had to begrudgingly admire the gooey properties of this concoction. If polar peoples have an entire vocabulary for snow and ice, bicycle travelers could create a similarly distinguishing lexicon for road surfaces.

I squatted under a juniper with my gloved hands in the pockets of my jacket. Mud slowly dissolved from my bike. The rain made soft sounds as it wet the ground, and harder knocks when drips fell from the tree onto my hood. I was dry and warm. Watching grey light play through the rain and onto the cliffs, picking through the colorful pebbles at my feet, my annoyance lifted and I felt blessed to sit for a time, alone in this place.

I pictured the web of roots intermingling underground, taking up moisture as it soaked in. Even in this dry sandy soil, there was undoubtedly a complex ecology of microorganisms, bugs, and roots. Through this continuous medium, all the sagebrush, pinyons and junipers were in contact. I no longer saw individual plants, but a single community of life tied together so closely as to be inseparable. I had seen a family of bighorn sheep in Arizona, and was amazed by the simplest thing: they nibbled bushes, getting their entire sustenance directly from the land, raw. Through the plants they were tied into the living soil, as was I, although my food and clothing were processed and from distant places. If I sat long enough, the "I" part of me would slip away, my flesh would feed scavengers, and the rest of me would settle into the living soil. I was only borrowing these materials for a time.

When the rain ebbed, meadowlarks began to sing and a sweet smell drifted on the cool air. Afternoon sunlight beamed through the clearing sky, forging dusky shadows and amber highlights on the fields and rocky ridges. Clusters of yellow blossoms and strokes of purple accented the washed fields of silvery sage and green scrub. Liberated briefly from self-imposed distractions, I felt the fullness of the present moment. I was nowhere other than there, watching the world unfold around me, hearing its music and feeling its magic.



Overhead, soft violet streaked the sky, while at the horizon, brilliant white clouds blew across deep blue like full sails. To the east, beyond slopes dotted with round juniper, the Henry Mountains wore a bright new mantle of snow, wreathed still in mist. Before me the red road wound over a series of hills rolling to the castle-like spires of Capitol Reef in the distance. I stood feeling the sun warm the left side of my face, then rode north with eyes and heart open.

Over the next two months, I settled into traveling, not always comfortable but generally content. Ramblings suited me. Long hours riding alone made the cycles of my moods as impossible to ignore as the weather, anxiety and contentment following one another like storm and sunshine, and I grew to accept this constant changing. Chapters of my life replayed themselves, some oft examined and others long forgotten, some joyful or glorious, others sad or shameful. Dropped balls and miscommunications carried more freight than home runs and romance. I found reassurance in the realization that this trip had been made more interesting by failures and disruptions, and when I set my memories back down, I felt closer to making peace with them.

The beginning and end of my journey, times of transition between a settled life and traveling, were especially rich in experience for me, perhaps in the way that transition zones between habitats—the meeting of forest and meadow, field and marsh, river and sea—are especially rich in life. Still, many moments from the middle of the trip remain strong in my memory.

Crossing the Wasatch range in northern Utah, I was surprised by the first snowstorm of the trip. I stood under a tree in my riding clothes, hoping it would pass quickly. It only snowed harder and I found myself soaked and cold. I pitched my tent by the roadside and spent the afternoon huddled in my sleeping bag, trying to get warm and feeling very alone.

One evening in southern Idaho, as I looked for a campsite after a long day riding, I got a crazy notion. With a warm, gentle wind at my back, I kept riding, thinking I could make Jackson Hole by morning. If I was lucky, I could share my glory with Fran, who had told me she might be in the Tetons. I climbed two passes in the hours before it was fully dark, then found a spot in a field to sleep until the moon came up. Lightning and raindrops woke me. After the brief thunder-shower passed, I headed onto the two-lane again, my tires sizzling on the wet pavement and a faint moon shadow on my left. Dogs barked when I passed dark farmhouses. The day grew light as I climbed along the Snake River, and I remembered how different dawn is from dusk. When I rolled into Jackson around 9:30 am, I was proud, elated, and sore. Since the previous morning I had ridden 190 miles. Fran, it turned out, was two states away.

In Yellowstone, I crossed the Continental Divide three times and got snowed on again, this time on the summer solstice. Passing Old Faithful, I saw bison grazing around an overpass and what looked like a shopping mall. My sense of Western lands was shifting: what I had thought of as open country with scattered settlements began to seem like a mostly human-altered landscape with scattered remnants of wilderness.

I rode through the Red Rock Lakes wildlife refuge in southern Montana, where the trumpeter swan had been saved from extinction. From far out on the flat marshy lakes came a riotous cacophony, the birds hidden by thick reeds. A mobile of swallows spun around me when I sat on a small bridge to write at dusk. In the morning, I watched a pair of crimson-crested

sandhill cranes, tall as my waist and armed with spear-like beaks, stalking through the pungent sagebrush looking for mice.

The Idaho panhandle was unexpectedly overgrown and lush. Following the Pend Oreille river I passed countless osprey nests atop derelict pilings. In Washington, the land was again dryer as I crossed a series of mountain ranges and hot river valleys—the Columbia, the Okanagen. Many of these miles overlapped a cross-country route popular with bicycle tourists, and I passed lots of other cyclists—more women than men—at the beginning of trips headed east with the prevailing winds. After the final climb up the northern Cascades, I descended through verdant woods and came to the edge of the continent south of Bellingham, where the Pacific lapped at mud flats and smelled stewy. Riding north on the Chuckanut highway I looked out at rainforested islands and remembered the deserts of the continent's interior where I had started from, far to the south. Having spanned the territory of the West, I felt its immensity, but also its finitude.

A hundred miles north along British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, where roads end at Powell River, I ferried to Vancouver Island, then again to twelve-mile-long Hornby Island. I felt instantly welcomed by the community, rich in home pottery studios and organic farms. A new friend showed me the beach where locals swam, naked mostly, and when I left, she gave me an eagle feather from under a nesting tree by her cabin.

During my months of traveling, I lived simply. I wore but two shirts. I had no timepiece, keys, or electronics. I appreciated simple devices: my pen, my wooden bowl, the zippers and buckles that secured my bags. Anything I acquired I had to carry. I read books and wrote in a journal. I listened to the songs of coyotes and birds, of wind and rain. I swam in lakes, streams and the ocean. I lived by my wits, and the decisions that affected me were my own. When it was dark I slept, on the ground in a place that I chose. I bathed when I could, and my skin and hair toughened—I seasoned. My work, pedaling my bicycle across the land, was straightforward, demanding, and tangible. I was sometimes uncomfortably hot and dry, and at others cold and wet, but I weathered all conditions. I fed and doctored myself. For the most part, I lived without using cars, toilets, beds or buildings, and felt peculiar when I did. I lived by my own decisions.

At the end of July I went home, taking a bus from Seattle back to San Francisco. Excited to be returning, I was also nervous knowing that it could no longer be the same home it had been. As the bus rumbled down I-5 in the last hours of the trip, I woke early to watch the sunrise. The orange sun oozed like an egg yolk over the hazy horizon of the brown Central Valley. It was a landscape unlike anything I had seen on my travels; its familiarity felt both welcoming and stifling.

By the time we topped the rise past the Carquinez Straits bridge and began to drop toward the East Bay, the sky had become overcast and grey. We passed the huge Chevron refinery, lights blinking from its monstrous superstructure, steam gushing from tall stacks and vents amidst the jumble of pipes and tanks. I saw its ugliness register on the grim faces of two Canadian girls sitting across from me, traveling to San Francisco for the first time. As we edged along the bay at Berkeley, old tires and trash protruded from mud flats left bare by low tide. Traffic across the Bay Bridge was thick, making the sky seem more dingy.

At 9:00 on a Monday morning, the bus arrived at the terminal in downtown San Francisco. I loaded gear back onto my bike for the ride crosstown. Heading out among the buses



and delivery trucks, pedestrians, and street construction, I focused on avoiding the hundreds of possible collisions. I felt myself slipping into an old intensity, a coat once worn every day but now tight and scratchy. I breathed exhaust and urine vapors. Corpse-like figures sprawled in doorways, clothing soiled, bare feet swollen and bleeding. Amidst the concrete, metal and glass, human bodies looked mushy, like slugs, belonging in a garden but braced for traveling this hard, sharp terrain. I looked for open ground but there was none. A few street trees poked from pores in the pavement, their roots undoubtedly surrounded by pipes, wires and debris, their branches only suckers growing from limbs pruned to knobs. Between buildings, the sky was criss-crossed by a web of overhead lines. A company van bore the name Engineered Air.

In the weeks that followed I visited familiar people and places. Walking through an oak woodland in Golden Gate Park where the Greens had cleared ivy, I saw native beeplant, lupine, and sticky monkeyflower were popping up. I found two friends painting a colorful mural on the face of a community foodstore while on my way to Ocean Beach to brave the cold surf. In the backyard of my sublet, I cleared blackberry vines, built compost bins, and planted seedlings I had rescued from the dumpster in front of a remodeling nursery.

Fran was leaving to spend time with her new man, and we caught up as best we could. I returned part-time to my job in the city's energy conservation office, putting respectable shoes over my tanned feet, riding an elevator up into a sealed office building, attending meetings, sitting at a computer manipulating numbers, and looking out an unopenable window at huge flags billowing over United Nations Plaza. One day in my cubicle I was changing into work clothes after biking to work when I felt the string around my neck give away. The turquoise disk that had rested against my chest for two-thousand miles fell softly into my lap.

My days were strained, but I did not feel desperate. Months of living outdoors had given me a sense for my place in the flow of life, for the breath of wild creatures carried on the wind. Living by my wits had taught me the value of patient attention when faced with challenging circumstances. These lessons had taken form inside me like a pearl, and helped me keep my bearings.

One day I lay thinking on a field in Golden Gate Park. The field was unlike any natural land I had sat on in the last months. No bugs crawled on me, and grass covered the field's smoothly rounded contours in constant green like an outdoor carpet. I watched a police cruiser drive by on a path stenciled, "No Bicycles." A hawk flew in a straight line over the treetops, strong wings beating slowly, with a small black bird harassing her from above. Looking back, that moment may have been the first in which I accepted the knowledge that had been building for some time. I needed to leave the city.

Ten weeks after returning, with the summer fog gone and golden October days shortening toward winter, I did leave San Francisco. I wrapped up my affairs, reduced my possessions to a few boxes in a friend's garage and three footlockers I was taking with me, and went north, halfway to the Oregon border, to live at a nature center on the Mendocino coast. By the time hard rains began in December, I had settled into a new lifestyle.

I worked with my body, outside. Chopping and levering with a mattock, I uprooted dense patches of invasive broom and gorse that were spreading through the woods and fields. I helped restore a dilapidated greenhouse that would grow native seedlings to replant the cleared areas. And at night, or when it stormed, I sat in my one-room cabin and began to

write about my travels.

My writing was driven by an aspiration to create something, to throw a pot from the clay of my experiences, as well as a desire to share these experiences with friends. Mostly, though, my writing was driven by a need to better understand what had happened. I looked for meaning, wanting to understand why the journey had felt imperative, how it fit into the context of my life, and where it was taking me. Someday I may know more particulars. At this point, I saw only a general theme, what had become a definitive tension in my life: the dual, and sometimes dueling, instincts to settle and to roam, to sink roots and to take wing. The idea of home, whether neighborhoods or the whole West, local habitats or the entire living planet, had been on my mind throughout the trip. I thought perhaps my winged adventures had steered me back, better informed, to pursue rootedness. On multiple levels I had been cycling, and maybe I had cycled all the way back. I have not.

It is summer again, and already this year I have ridden from Oregon to Montana. Now I am in Colorado, hoping to work the winter in New Mexico before traveling again, to Alaska, Central America, or New England. Rather than get traveling out of my system, I whet my appetite for it, and my occasional aches for home ground are overshadowed by a steady wanderlust. I feel called to pursue essential parts of me and of the world began to reveal themselves during those months on the road, and these are what I now feel called to pursue. Roots will grow when my passions are most fired by the desire to make a home; then I will surely discover other essential parts of me. I only hope that my return to rootedness is as clearly indicated as my need last year to take flight. Riding across the land, I will watch around each bend for that day, the day when it is time to fold my wings.



Caron Campbell

## The Way Through

### Selected Memoirs of Three Seasons in the North Cascades

#### Stehekin

This is a place born out of a glacier. The retreating ice created the deepest gorge on the continent and the river filled it with snowmelt to create a long, narrow lake that plumbs below sea level in places. Ancient people painted shamanistic figures on the steep granite canyon walls. Later visitors named the lake Chelan, but "Stehekin" derives from aboriginal roots, so they say. It means "the way through," referring to the route up the valley and over Cascade Pass to the west side of the North Cascades in Washington State.

Today's valley residents are pioneer descendants, Park Service employees, artists, innkeepers, urban escapees, retirees, and seasonal workers. The population swells with tourists and temporary workers between April and October, but in winter only about seventy people remain. A fifth are children.

Stehekin folk are a diverse group, but everyone tries to get along. Remoteness necessitates cooperation. Parts of the road are so narrow a car going one direction has to pull over to let an oncoming car pass safely. That's the way of things there. Residents passing on the road always wave, but if two parties have some grief between them, the gesture is smaller.

The people of Stehekin know this is a rare kind of place in our time. Everywhere outside the valley is referred to as "downlake," and not just because one has literally to travel down the lake to get to other places. In contrast, one goes "upvalley" to the mountains, which are an extension of this place and not really considered going away.

Stehekin, with no road to the outside world, has a post office and one-room school up to eighth grade. A passenger ferry comes daily during spring, summer and fall—but only three times a week in the deep of winter—bringing freight, mail, food orders, mail-order packages, and visitors. Float planes can come in daylight, but only if the temperature is above fifteen degrees. Below that the rudders on the floats freeze.

Electric service began mid-century with the installation of a small hydrogenerator on Company Creek which has diesel generators as backup. Power outages are common. Recently a public satellite-linked telephone was installed near the boat landing, but previously the only communication to the outside was via the Park Service radio-telephone. Within the valley some parties have walkie-talkies. Television reception is possible only with a satellite dish and there are few of those. Some radio stations can be picked up after dark in certain parts of the valley.

Everyone heats with wood or pellet stoves. It takes many cords to keep away the cold of winters with an average of seven-foot accumulations of snow between Thanksgiving and April. Wood gathering and splitting require a large expendi-

ture of time and energy for those who choose to winter there.

Only three miles of the road are paved. A spur off the main road crosses the Stehekin River over Harlequin Bridge and runs a few miles upstream along the west side. Travelers on the main road have a well maintained gravel surface for the next eight miles upvalley to the North Cascades National Park boundary. Beyond that, the road is quite rough, more like a wide trail. It deadends in the heart of the Cascades.

I came here with my son and daughter in 1990 to give them the gift of a simpler, unpretentious lifestyle. I had first learned about Stehekin through an article in the April 1974 *National Geographic* and told myself I wanted to go there someday. Then, after years of graduate education, career, and early parenting, my chance came when I decided to venture there with my children during their spring break. I rented a cabin on the lake and packed up enough food for several days. My husband, Jim, had not planned vacation time during the children's school break, so it was just the three of us.

The passenger ferry, *Lady of the Lake II*, left the town of Chelan early on a brilliant and unseasonably warm April morning. My then ten-year-old son Bergen soon discovered another passenger who was whittling small wooden figures and was gracious about showing a young boy a thing or two about it. My seven-year-old daughter Quincy seemed bored, but was quietly taking in her surroundings. I was fascinated by the changes in terrain from dry brown hills to heavily treed mountains as we pushed deeper into the Cascades. By the time the four-hour trip brought us to Stehekin's boat landing, I was completely enchanted. I had arranged for two nights there, but we stayed four.

For many years I had tried to persuade Jim to take a sabbatical so we could give our children a special experience, maybe foreign travel, maybe seeing all the national parks, but he would not let go of a year of work in his medical practice. Yet, once I saw Stehekin I knew this was the adventure I'd hoped for, and that I could manage alone if it came to that. Jim was initially shocked by my proposal to take the children to live there, but he agreed, deciding to stay with his work and come up for visits every few weeks—no small effort in the winter.

We leased a furnished vacation house on the lakeshore. Our personal belongings were crammed into our station wagon, which was barged uplake in late August. Soon after settling in one of the pioneer granddaughters remarked to me that some people visit Stehekin, but others are called. I had heard the voices.

#### Indian Summer

The children began school in the hot last days of August. They settled in nicely and found their places in the social structure of fifteen students. The one-room situation allowed each student to function gracefully at individual learning levels. A student was grouped with others at the same skill level, regardless of age or grade. Younger students were often assisted by the older ones.



The teacher Ron Scutt, a tall gentle giant, had been teaching there for fourteen years. His own two sons were in the school, too, and called him Mr. Scutt just as the other students did. The emphasis was on creativity, but not at the expense of skills. The valley was part of the classroom. The children experienced and learned from their wilderness environment and wrote about it in journals.

Neatness was encouraged as an expression of pride in their work. Natural consequences were artfully applied. If Bergen forgot an assignment or book at home, Ron sent him back to get it, a three mile round trip. If he didn't get work done in the classroom on time, Ron stayed after school with him until it was completed.

There was such joy in the learning. Ron started each day reciting a poem with the children. Each month a new poem was learned which reflected the time of year. Valley residents lent their skills. Artists came and did special projects, I guided the older students through *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and another person taught algebra to the eighth grader. Longtime valley folk told their stories of the old days.

I remember wishing that all children everywhere could have this. Even though I suspected then that my own children would not treasure it fully until they were older, they were eager to get there each day.

The September afternoons were often a warm eighty degrees. When Bergen and Quincy got out of school at 2:00 they bolted home for a snack, then swam in the bay next to our house or gathered with the other children at the boat landing, where there is a dock and a family-owned snack bar. Eventually hunger and rules reluctantly brought them home for dinner.

After homework, we'd read aloud until bedtime. We'd often done that before coming to Stehekin, but here there was no television to compete. I cherished those times, knowing that all too soon they would no longer sit with me and listen to a book.

Deep red sockeye salmon returned to spawn late in the month and we loved to glide out into the bay in our canoe to watch them. Sometimes they came very close, their dorsal fins breaking through the surface. One of my new friends was an artist who takes her young son every fall to a special place on the river where they paint watercolor impressions of the sacred fish.

It was warm during those days, but the mornings were cool, hinting at the colder season before us, so I was often busy splitting and stacking wood for the winter—Bergen, too. One day he split such a large pile with sledge hammer and wedge that came to me to take a photo of it. He stood at the top of the pile, holding the sledge hammer in a great-white-hunter pose, full of pride and accomplishment.

When he was sixteen and in love for the first time, he searched through our Stehekin photos and found it to show his beloved: Here I am. I was ten years old.

There is no traditional trick-or-treating in Stehekin and the kids expressed a sense of deprivation about not getting their usual booty. I didn't feel sorry for them, though, because Halloween is a very big deal here. For several weeks the children and their dedicated parents prepared for a community-wide celebration held a few days early in the historic Golden West Lodge. The lobby was decorated as a ghoulish mall, with various monstrous and scary storefronts.

Three skits were performed in different rooms in the old inn, with visitors being escorted in small groups from room to room to see the children ham it up. In one room the oldest children presented a clever Laurel-and-Hardy scene titled *Dismal Diner*, with Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker whipping up Halloween cuisine.

Another room was *Creep Cafe*, where two vampires, Slurp and Mash, and their bat friend Fang were served mosquito soufflé and werewolf salad by a devil named Blaze. Then they were discovered and melted with garlic juice by that notorious vampire hunter, Garlic Jones.

The third skit was the refuge of the younger children and the girls. It was called Neewollah Moor ("Halloween Room") where everything was backwards from the expected. Guests walked under a sign that said "No Exit" into a room that was decorated like the outdoors. The children were dressed in costumes of their favorite fantasies and gave tricks to the visitors befitting their roles: pine cones from the pioneer girl, rocks from the heavy equipment operator, ice cubes from the skater.

In the main lobby there was apple bobbing and a wealth of potluck treats brought by valley residents, many of whom had come in costume. The winners of the pumpkin-carving contest received prizes of candy. The school teacher, Ron, showed a Joe E. Brown movie with an old 16mm projector that barely survived the ordeal. For an adult, the horror of this movie was that it was made in the first place, but the children loved the visual and physical gags.

Jim came for a surprise visit and was with us on Halloween. He helped the children carve their pumpkins. They scooped out the gooey insides in the cold air outside as the last light of day turned to grey. When the jack-o-lanterns were finished, we put candles in their hollows and arranged them on the porch so that neighbors across the way could admire them.

The next day one of those neighbors complimented their artwork and the blue jays feasted on the seeds bequeathed to them near the back steps. We made pumpkin pies the following weekend. Those Halloween treats lasted longer than any tootsie rolls.

---

*Snowflakes so light they dance  
about before descending. Greedy blue jays.  
Nervous sparrows. Chickadees clinging  
upside down to pine cones.*

---



morning. Sipping fresh-ground coffee while gazing at the lake. Writing letters during snowfall with concertos. Steaming bodies emerging from a sauna, hands full of powder snow melting on hot skin.

### *Tending the Fire*

Against the backdrop of wilderness and freed of urban din and hassle, everyday activities became joyful work for me. I was particularly fond of stoking the fire in our woodburning stove and it became a beloved

ritual: I would open the damper, then the door to the woodstove just a crack for a few moments to prevent a backflash. When I opened it fully, the coals would tinkle with a sound like a windchime made of small sea shells. A lavender-to-orange flame hovered over the coals and the fragrance of alder smoke evoked decades of memories.

I would fill the firebox, solving the placement of the different pieces of wood like a jigsaw puzzle. Satisfied, I'd close the door, shut the damper, adjust the draft. Tending the fire gave me great pleasure.

It went beyond warmth. It reached back to the tree that was still standing the previous summer. The Park Service had determined that it was a "hazard tree" and cut it down. Our household obtained it by permit in the fall.

Splitting the tree rounds was honest and uncomplicated. There was a straightforward satisfaction in my physical strength, a life-affirming joy, as the wood fell apart with a crack under my maul. With each blow I revealed its inner secrets. I felt respect, even affection, for that alder tree: the curving of the vertical grain; the iridescence and subtle shadings of the heartwood; the woody odor. I was touched by some regret that it would be burned.

The wedges of that tree were heavy and unseasoned as I stacked them. They were so wet that pink fungus was growing on the raw ends. As the woodpile grew, sounds around me heralded the change of season: scattered raindrops, wood thunking into place, the river's journey over gravel and rock, rustling leaves.

In the woodstove the tree warmed me, again. And more. I reflected on my reasons for being in this remote valley in the mountains. I had left behind professional success and metropolitan life. I had persuaded Jim to let me bring our children to the wilderness for three seasons. I needed to tend their fires. My fire. I had to give them this kind of life to warm them during the colder stretches of their growing up. I needed to stoke my own fire against the chill of midlife self-doubts.

Artwork: C.J. Diegel



### *Winter Snapshots*

A crescent moon at dawn on a winter morning. Full moon on New Year's Eve. Icicles on the eaves in parallel rows like shark's teeth. A marten frolicking in fresh snow. Children making snow angels. A neighborhood nighttime snowball fight, with fireworks finale. The low winter sun warming the peak of McGregor Mountain in the morning while the valley remained in shadows. Snowflakes so light they danced about before descending. Greedy blue jays. Nervous sparrows. Chickadees clinging upside down to pine cones. Rainbow Falls frozen into massive blue-green icicles. River boulders capped with two-foot-high top hats of snow. Creeks gurgling under drifts. Thick-coated deer. Bushy-tailed coyotes. Children sculpting snow furniture. Mists forming over the river. Two sunsets a day as the sun passed behind a peak then reappeared briefly in the cleft. Bicycling at nine degrees. Christmas carols by candlelight in the school's great room. Snow-walled pathways. A rainbow over the valley after a heavy snowfall. Rosy-cheeked yahoo sledding through the trees. A meadow crossed and recrossed with animal tracks. Removing slivers after hauling wood. Cross-country ski tips surfacing then sinking in the powder like porpoises. The multicolored pile of snow clothing and boots of ten children at our house for Thursday afternoon games and chocolate chip cookies. Waiting for packages and mail at the Post Office on boat days. Reading aloud in the evenings. The Sunday paper on Monday afternoon. The children performing magic tricks and spontaneous plays. Bolting awake with the sound of snow sliding off the metal roof. Weekly power outages. Hot buttered rums and hot chocolates with miniature marshmallows. Greeting visitors at the boat landing. The fragrance of evergreens gathered in the woods. The glow of our holiday-lighted house viewed from the outside looking in. A New Year's bouquet on the front door made from holidays bows and ribbons. Breakfasts by "snowlight." Card games. Home-made beer and bear stories. Tending the fire at three in the



After banking the stove for the night, I would step back and feel warmed with contentment. The children were sleeping. Dreaming.

### *Laundry in Spring*

When I would step out of the shower, I'd bring the towel to my face and hold it there as I breathed in deep, slow breaths, pulling in the scent of sun and fresh air captured in the cotton loops. I detected faint conifer scents, perhaps cottonwood, too, for the wind that dried the towel had moved through those trees during its pass down the valley . . .

Laundry is one of the chores of living that I do not mind. In Stehekin, it was a pleasure for me, because I could dry the clothes outdoors much of the year.

We were lucky to have a clothes-drying tree, that rotating kind of clothesline. My mother-in-law had one and perhaps there was one in my childhood in the years before we had a dryer. The one in Stehekin squeaked when the wind turned it suddenly. One of the arms had to be reinforced because it was bent under a wet, heavy snowfall before we were willing to admit that it was winter and time to bring it in.

The washing machine we had was an embarrassment of engineering, but it did expose the items in it to water and soap enough to change their general appearance and odors. It was the outdoor drying that was the effective part of the laundering process.

On the east side of the mountains, sun is plentiful and the wind rushes down to the lake with daily predictability. Unlike the upper reaches of the steep-walled valley, our setting by the shore gave us many hours each day of direct sunlight to lure the water out of the fabrics.

It was a beautiful sight: The clothes dancing in the breeze, vibrant with the brilliant colors that were happily the fashion. The wind frequently changed the tempo of their rhythms, but they were nearly always moving, filling, flapping, wiggling. Pants doing a jig. Shirts gesturing wildly. Fitted sheets billowing and jibing the clothestree hard-a-lee. Fabric poems, odes to joy. Swallows accompanied with cascades of cheerful notes.

. . . I'd take in one last breath of towel's scent before drying the rest of me and the fragrance felt like a gift of gratitude from the cotton for having a chance to wave in the sun and wind once more.

### *Bread and Waltzes*

I began baking bread again. There was a time when I did it frequently and even ground my own flour with a hand-grinder, long years ago. I had forgotten the rewards of baking bread. It got lost in all the rush and clutter of graduate school, work, gardening, child-needing. I was brought to my senses when visiting a neighbor in late winter who was proofing loaves near her woodstove. I bought yeast with the next grocery order.

The first bread I made was a dill and cottage cheese dinner roll, so easy and delicious I felt I had cheated somehow. It required no kneading. I made the equivalent of one loaf, yet for us and our guests for dinner that evening, it was not enough.

Next I made a molasses whole-wheat bread. I waited for the children to arrive home from school so we could do it together. Quincy and I began the process because Bergen had lingered at school to play. The steps took a long time because I wanted her to understand and to think as we went along. She read all the instructions aloud and told us what to do. If she didn't understand, then it became an opportunity to explain or show or guide. Bergen arrived in time for the kneading, which he enjoyed with boyish gusto.

One day I made honey-sweetened whole-wheat loaves. I had just come back from visiting some elderly valley acquaintances. Older people make me think deeply about my life, values, choices, and staying healthy. The granddaughter of ninety-year-old Herbie was baking bread during my visit, so I was inspired to make some myself when I got home.

I often work around the house and cook with music. That day I chose a collection of Strauss waltzes and polkas. The yeast smell rose with the tempo. I kneaded to *The Blue Danube*. I imagined glittering nineteenth century grand ballrooms with elegant couples whose hearts were pounding with dancing and desire. I took in the grandeur of the wilderness outside my windows, sad that we would be leaving in a month.

As I kneaded the dough deeply, I thought about my children and the ingredients of life I had given them. I have tried to offer them a balance of wholesomeness and sweetener, kneading them with loving discipline, my values, and my hopes for them, proofing them in this wilderness environment, allowing them to grow some before hitting the ovens of adolescence.

Once it was baking, the bread's hearth-and-home aroma escaped from the oven. When the children came home from school that day, it pleased me that they were greeted by the bread's fragrance.

We ate it hot, with butter and raspberry jam.



John Cooley

## *The Tower on Fern Hill*

### An Invitation

Let me guide you to a place you may be seeking. Though you have to climb a woodsy knoll behind my house, I've raked the path smooth, and the rise is easy even if you're barefoot. This main path cuts a direct course through a woods of hemlock and pine, interspersed with American beech, shagbark hickory, ironwood, paper birch and sugar maple. My friends Kay and Walter once identified fifteen varieties of fern growing on the hill so you can see why we call it Fern Hill with this profusion of fronds: the graceful lady fern, sturdy woodfern, delicate swirls of maidenhair and clumps of my favorite, the ever-green Christmas fern. Between the ferns the ground is covered with a rich matting of partridge berry and ground pine, with spikes of club moss sticking through.

To the right of the main path we pass a steep outcropping of slate and marble, an odd partnership, but not surprising to anyone who knows this part of the Taconic mountains in mid-Vermont. To the west, stretching toward Lake Champlain and New York State, the land is pockmarked with mostly abandoned slate quarries. Just one or two valleys to the east, at Proctor, you'll find one of the nation's biggest marble quarries. The slate to the west and the marble to the east collide here in tortured and tilted slate formations layered with bands of white marble.

If you take the side path to the top of the hill you'll find an inviting stand of white birch and a faded hammock. It's a good place to stretch out for an afternoon nap or a quiet read. But our destination is a water tower, and you can see it now perched on its own slate ledge, down below us. I like the way it hunkers there solidly on its cradle of big timbers—dark brown like the tree trunks around it, yet bathed in the soft green light filtering through the high canopy.

These foundation timbers are ridiculously over built; in fact, the whole tower is—designed to hold several thousand gallons of water rather than a few people. Notice how snugly its 2x6 inch pine walls are held in place by those stout metal bands and turn-buckles—strong enough to hold all the water for a girls' summer camp. The timbers it sits on probably date from an earlier tower, the way so many ancient church foundations do. If you look down the ledge you'll see metal bands and rotting timbers from two earlier towers. Even before there was a summer camp here, itself now long gone, a tower on this site must have supplied water to the barns and farm house at the head of Beebe Lake. The present roof is my own doing, practical but forgettable compared to the peaked "extinguisher" cap it once sported, which must have given it the look of a watch tower for some unseen fortress high on Barber's Ledge. Artless as it is, my undistinguished cap sheds rain and keeps the place dry.

I've cut in three little windows and this curved door. From the front-facing windows, through the gaps in hemlock

and maple boughs, you can spy Eagle Rock rising across the valley and the lake down below.

Sorry about the squeaky door, but let's go in. Not much here to look at or fuss with: curved writing table, curved sitting bench and a curved bunk in the half-round loft above us. These two old easy chairs, discarded from the cottage I live in like most of what's here, make for creaky rocking. The foam pads, mats and downy sleeping bags render the wooden bench and the loft almost comfortable. I've not stained the walls—this honey tan is just a natural aging brought on by years of repeated soaking and drying. The wall hangings, mostly driftwood, dried fungi, and some prize pieces of marble, are trophies brought back from many day hikes. You probably expected a candle or oil lamp, but the electrical line lets me plug in a computer, desk light and an electric tea kettle. Would you like a mug of tea in my mug-shaped hangout? I can offer sassafras or ginger root, both gathered on Fern Hill.

You'll find neither locks nor keys here, for there is nothing of monetary value, nothing one would be inclined to steal in the usual reckoning of things. Hunters have used the place for a few hours shelter in sudden autumn storms. Kids from the lake occasionally use the tower as their playful destination. More than one "wolf" has taken to bed in this round cottage, wearing Granny's nightgown. An overflow guest house, its wooden bunks have made Spartan slumbering for my daughters Carolyn and Meredith and their guests. When the moon glows through summer branches, the great horned owl hoots and cicadas shrill, couples sometimes sneak to the dark tower and make their love nests here. The woodland animals are also welcome, but they enter by different doors. The mice and squirrels enter through their own cellar door, down where the drain pipe hides itself. (Some years ago my daughter Carolyn brought home a large spider she couldn't bear to have killed by the kids at her day camp. She carried her "Charlotte" to the water tower where she would be safe enough to build her web. Charlotte's descendants still live here, I'm pretty sure, to frighten the uninitiated and keep the flies in check). The tower stays open to all who come with the right intention, would use it for love or play, recovery or shelter.

There's nothing square about this place. If you look up near the ceiling you'll see a dark band—that's the high water mark. When this big barrel worked for a living, fulfilling its built purpose, it was water to the brim all summer, holding—my crude math tells me—7,400 gallons. If I know the local habits, this big barrel was drained out by Labor Day and left empty all winter. There must have been a sizable pump, though I've never found a hint of it, to bring the pure water of Beebe Lake way up here. With all that water trying to seep through, these 2x6 planks would swell till they were completely watertight. The precious cargo was dispensed to the camp buildings below via that rusting three-inch drainpipe you saw outside. One line plunged down over the rocks to the dining hall and bunk houses just below. Another descended more gradually to the girls' shower house, which is now our summer cottage. There, a coal-burning behemoth once hissed and smoked, belching out steamy-hot showers for grimy campers. The cinder clinkers still surface with every spade-full of earth. Behind



the insulation and paneling of our shower house the walls still boast the lipstick graffiti of summer hopes and disappointments—“Jessy loves Alex—1949”—“1950—Alex is a total shit.” The shower waters and frustrations drained together toward an unreliable little stream they named the “Mighty Rubicon”. Unlike the Roman Legionnaires, they had to cross the Rubicon just to take a shower—and you crossed it today, unknowingly, in the little valley below my house. Your commitment had begun before you even knew what you were crossing or ascending to.

The tower occasionally reminds me of its previous uses and other inhabitants. In rainy periods it smells more like pond than house, ancient reservoir odors emerging from woodwork that hasn't forgotten what it used to hold. Squirrels rent the upper bunk for the winter season. Perhaps startled by spring, they pack up fast, forgetting to clear their nested leaves away. Before a rain the night moths fly in, finding their own doorways in the cracks, seeking dry lodging against a storm that would do them in. When the afternoon thunderstorms roll over from the west, after crashing through the Adirondacks and pounding across Lake Champlain, the racket can be deafening. These storm-stressed walls magnify the thunderclaps and lingering rumbles. Lightning flashes through the little windows, and rain spatters on the leaves, but whatever gets caught inside stays snug and dry.

Wet or dry, this barrel gives musicians some lively sounding boards. I'll wager you could shatter a stemmed glass in here, if you could find one, with your violin or trumpet. There's an old recorder and a blues harp on the table there—before long I'll leave you to make your own music, chant “Ah Om”, or read aloud, as you wish. Like everything else set loose in here, your sounds and thoughts will circle about, maybe ferment a bit, and come back around. I'm not a musician myself, but I've heard visitors make fine tower music, and all our croakings discover new resonance here.

Many a good story has been told in this round room, and the best of my humble writings and books have been started or fixed here. Morning after morning I've ambled up the main path, big coffee mug in hand, then donned my flippers and mask to dive once more into the startling waters of this deep tank. What else is there to do but write under water? When my oxygen tank fades and I escape to normal air, I'm usually surprised at what I've written. Sometimes I know the words have come from some other zone, but I claim them anyway.

The sun is sinking lower through the western woods, and I must return to my chores down below. I'll take the undercliff walk—a spur to the right that diverges from the main path. It's my favorite way to go back, though rough, with steep dips and rises. It's a good one to take if you haven't had your fill of woods and rock for the day and want to tarry, even on the way back. I like to inspect the ebony spleenwort and rusty woodsia that cling to cracks and sockets in the cliff, and to look up at the polypodia that thatches the cliff tops like a farmhouse haircut.

Stay till dark if you wish and dare; I have no need of the tower for the remainder of the day. If you came with plans for reading or writing, I hope you will find my barrel condu-

cive. There's pen and paper here and a small collection of nature books: Thoreau to Muir, Burroughs to Bass. But if it's your first trip of this sort, you may just wish to sit back and let the clogging highway thoughts drain down. Just as old logging roads cough up the stone-wall traces of abandoned farm fields, these walls could fill you with stories of kids now grown, and adults long gone. This barrel house and the bedrock we named Fern Hill keep their stories close to the surface, accessible to all who can read them.

When you are ready to come down, the living woods awaits outside your tower door as does the tri-via of return paths to choose from. The lower trail needs wear and snakes invitingly. You came by the upper path and may wish to return that way, or, if normal time intrudes, take the smooth and hasty, main-traveled one. Promise yourself to return someday and take another way to this fermenting tank on the hill of rock and fern.



John Cooley

## Searching for the Faerie Ring

Our friends Warren and Sally Foster and their daughter, Gina, have just arrived for a swim and picnic. It's a hot mid-August afternoon and we could easily spend the time floating about in the tepid waters of Beebe Lake, but my wife, Barbara, and I suggest the option of a three-mile hike to Lost Pond where the water is so clear you can see thirty feet down and so cold below the warm surface it'll feel like winter in summer. I add that we might even find some edible mushrooms on the way, but fail to mention that the rough path is mostly uphill. The enticement is sufficient and within minutes we are filling our day packs with towels, apples, cameras, plastic bags for picking berries or mushrooms, and heading for the woods path.

The trail soon turns rough, cluttered with slashing left from all the cutting. Easily a thousand acres of mixed pine and hardwoods have been selectively cut over the last few years in the several square miles we think of as our home woods. I complain about missing the big white pines and stately oaks and about how the trail is almost obliterated by the rubble. But Barbara, who usually offers the positive when I grumble the negative, (and maybe I do the same for her, come to think of it) says, "look at the blackberries—there are enough here for berry cobbler. We might as well get them on our way back so they don't get smushed." I know she's right about the berries on both counts—and there are more ruffed grouse and other game birds lurking in the brush piles and fattening on the berries, but damnit I miss those big trees and the clear-flowing brook.

Sally asks if we're supposed to be looking for mushrooms. Barbara and I look at each other and we reply almost in chorus: "It's been a terrible year for our favorites, the chanterelles." "Too dry." "Too hot." "The rain storms came too late." It had been one of the most dismal chanterelle summers I can remember. We managed to find one or two dry and diminutive patches of the elusive fungi, which we sauteed and added to a pasta salad. That was it.

The Fosters have never tasted chanterelles, but having heard us rave about them, want to know what the fuss is all about. "Well, don't pump your hopes up 'cause we won't find any," I blurt out, "but just in case, look for a yellow mushroom shaped like a fluted vase with a puffy cap."

"They don't have gills or they do, but they don't look like gilled mushrooms," Barbara adds, "and they're usually a rich gold, but sometimes on the orange side, and sometimes washed out toward a faded yellow." Pretty soon Warren and Sally and Virginia were pointing out every yellow or orange mushroom in the woods. If we could only find one or two real chanterelles, I'm sure they'd get the idea, but it's really pointless to look, anyway.

I'm mentally punching myself for not bringing along

our battered copy of Smith's guide, so we wouldn't have to speak from memory. I've learned from Alexander Smith's *Mushroom Hunter's Field Guide* that the entire family *Cantharellus cibarius* (known to those of Germanic stock as Pfifferlinge) is characterized by a fluted or ridged undersurface. If they've got fine toothed gills they're not chanterelles. They're a little family, as mushrooms go, numbering only about nine varieties, including some distaff cousins. One chanterelle variety looks like pig's ears sticking out of a mud wallow—sought after mainly by flies that probably believe they're feasting on sow's ears. I don't want to confuse the Fosters so I don't mention the pig's ears variety, or another chanterelle cousin I've seen in Smith's book, but never in the field. *Craterellus cornucopoides* is known alternatively as the Trumpet of Death and the Horn of Plenty. It sounds like a cornucopia of toxins, doesn't it—a lethal last meal—but Smith reports that it's entirely edible. The family skin color shades from pure white to pink, through the yellows and golds, to orange-red, vermillion and purple.

Against nature's profusion you finally have to simplify, and for us that's the classic vase-shaped and fluted yellow-gold "classic" chanterelle—leaving the cornucopias and the pigs ears to the aficionados and the flies.

As we work our way through the logging rubble along the valley our old path finally emerges from the slashing, and we catch sight of the little stream, known locally at the "Mighty Rubicon," reflecting shafts of sunlight that spear through the heavy hemlock canopy. We're all dripping sweat now. One of the hottest summers on record; even in mid-August it's a convection oven day. The usually-energetic Fosters move lethargically, but Vermonters don't get oven days very often. We talk about cold topics: a new Ben and Jerry's flavor at the "factory seconds" store, the glaciers of Chamoinox, the newly-discovered "ice man" who has been deep-frozen in the Alps for five thousand years. Not a bad idea, we contemplate, half-enviously.

I hear an ovenbird singing, if you can call it that, "Teacher, Teacher, Teacher," an annoying reminder that Barbara and I will be back in the classroom in two weeks. I can't help thinking of Robert Frost's poem "The Ovenbird," about this bird I've seldom seen, who dares to nest on the ground in mid-woods, dares to shrill steadily, even on the hottest afternoons when all sensible souls have given up. Its song leads Frost to one of my favorite lines: "The question that he frames in all but words is what to make of a diminished thing." With the ovenbird call in one ear and Frost's line ringing in the other, I contemplate this last woods hike before we return to Michigan, and hope the end of summer is all that the question frames. Then Barbara calls out "It's the ovenbird." I nod, smiling.

Our talk keeps coming back to chanterelles, mainly because we feel positively cheated by the heat and early drought, and our Vermont summer is rapidly diminishing. I can't say we had been totally denied, but our meager chanterelle snack was more like eating perch when you crave trout. There are other choice mushrooms too—the beef-steak Morels early in the season, the Boletus in August and Slippery Jacks in September, but in a decent northern summer July gives us a month of day lilies and the prospect of chanterelles. Under the right mix of sun and rain they burst onto the scene for July 4th. Indepen-



dent from path, fence and highway, they crave freedom like Vermont's first freedom fighters, the Green Mountain Boys.

No two chanterellers agree on where to hunt for those hunks of pale gold. I tell the Fosters if we find any they'll be under pine and hemlock—or not at all. Just to be contrary and confuse the topic, Barbara says she's found them nestled in the duff of mixed hardwood forests. The special thing about chanterelle hunting, I confide in Warren and Sally, already sorry I'd committed myself to the big revelation, is that once you find a patch it's like adding merit pay to your base salary. In addition to two or maybe three pickings a summer, they emerge every year in the same place, often for years to come, with the possibility of more golden nuggets each passing year as the plant gains appetite to devour the decaying matter it feasts on. So if you can find your patch next year, and resist all temptation to blab about your great fortune, you can cash in again and again. What's more, they're gregarious, neighborly, even community-minded little fungi. Sure, you'll find a few rugged individualists flying the old Vermont snake flag that hisses "Don't Tread on Me," but nine hundred out of a thousand will live domestically in congenial communities. So to find one is to find many; to find them once is to harvest them annually.

Barbara adds, "Don't forget about the isolated ones—lone chanterelles like lone wolves—and every one counts."

"Okay then, you look for the loners, the hermits, the castaways; I'm looking for the faerie ring."

"I'm not looking for faerie rings or hermits, and we won't find them in this drought, I just want a cold swim." Barbara declares.

Wiping sweat from my eyes with my T-shirt I'm beginning to admit to myself this sweltering hike is a mistake. Even talk of ice caves in the Chaminoix glacier is not up to the task of cooling us, as we sweat and drip up the old trail. We've hiked well beyond the logging zone now. We're walking between the exposed slate slabs of Barber's Ledge, and shaded from the afternoon blast overhead by rough-ribbed old maples and patriarchal white pines. Autumn's going to arrive early, I think, noticing the dry curls of bracken, and partridge berries already showing some red.

We walk past one of my old reliables, the first faerie ring I ever found, and though I'm prepared to share it with the Fosters if we hit faerie gold, there's not a chanterelle to be seen, not even a dried ruin or two of what was, so I don't say anything about the ring. (I'd like to have the "curse" of King Midas for just one day and have everything I touch turn to chanterelles).

I don't even know why they form rings, but I know they tend to move outward, enlarging each year until, I have to imagine, they exhaust the decaying vegetable matter that feeds them. Our summer neighbor, Maude, confided in Barbara about the first faerie ring she and her chanterelling partner, Edith, found together. There must have been a hundred chanterelles ready for the cutting. Maude says she sat down in the middle of the ring and, overwhelmed by the presence of all those golden funnels, and enveloped in their apricot aroma—she felt like she was having an orgasm right there. "Who needs a husband if you can have a faerie ring," she must have thought.

Maude and Edith harvested their hoard, and swore to protect the location for years to come. I chuckle inwardly, picturing not Maude and Edith but two crones, capes flapping, baskets brimming, swearing on the sacred mushrooms never to tell a soul.

"Swear it, dearie," the one rasps.

The other, on her knees now before the baskets and the ring: "I swear it, Oh I do swear it."

That's one of the strange things about our usually neighborly lake community: once we begin finding chanterelles the leisurely woods walks of several families with dogs yelping and kids in tow comes to a temporary halt. A veil of secrecy descends. Old chanterelling partners, who have shared a major find, revisit their old "claims" to see what's popping up. Neighbors gossip at Rick's Eagle Rock Store about unlikely twosomes seen slipping off to the woods or returning furtively, hoping to escape notice. Some of us trust no one and prefer sneaking out to the woods alone and unseen.

I'm not sure why mushrooms get associated with the sensual and the erotic, but they certainly do. In certain Mexican Indian stories it is said that mushrooms are born of the sexual intercourse of a lightning bolt and the earth. The fruiting stems of mushrooms are not the plant itself but just its flowering tips. They emerge from the leaf litter of a woods floor when the plant is mature and ready to disseminate its spores, if there is sufficient moisture to cause the rapidly-growing flesh to rise and swell into a "bloom." Sometimes these plants-without-chlorophyll look and feel like skin, taking on the texture and firmness of flesh, and resembling mammalian genitalia. Penises of various sizes, colors, textures and odors thrust through the forest duff and rise from several inches to a prodigious two feet. Their spores released, some mushrooms begin to wither and wilt within hours of their emergence. Others will stay aloft for a week or so. Some concave fungi, including the chanterelle of course, suggest female genitalia. A few mushrooms are regarded as aphrodisiacs, while others have been taken as medicinal contraceptives.

I'll confess I haven't walked in the bowers of bliss and I'm innocent to the erotic side of chanterelling, but I do have an imagination. Recalling that the Greek word for vase or cup was also their word for—can you guess?—the vessel-shaped mushroom, *canthrellus*, I wonder what the old goat-footed god Pan was pursuing in the Olympian forests. In my now-unleashed imagination I see the cloven-hooved Pan pursuing a radiant woods' nymph, her basket brimming with canthrellus. The delicate aroma of apricot suffuses the bower of Laurel and grasses. I would like to sneak closer and see if the nymph spilled her basket-full as she fell into the arms of Pan, but discretion keeps me at a distance.

All our secrecy, for whatever reasons, doesn't mean the fruit of this furtive woods walking is devoured in isolation. Bragging rights set in. Drinks and dinner parties celebrate the harvest of the golden fungi with dishes like Edith's famous hot chanterelle appetizer, or chanterelle-and-seafood pasta, and chanterelle-and-cheese omelettes. My absolute favorite is chanterelle-cheese-and lobster pizza. But only the uninitiated visitor asks where they were picked. We will each smile wryly and



repeat, "I'm sworn to secrecy," as if it were our summer mantra.

Suddenly we frighten a quail into action, then two more—beating wild wings, forcing us to duck and wonder if they are on the attack or retreat. We pause to eat some of the blackberries they were fattening on.

Berries, but no chanterelles. A year ago one of our visitors, Karen Keller, found a little patch of the golden beauties right here. The rest of us, including her husband Bob, commenced crashing about the woods looking for more. By sticking to the trail, lifting grasses with her walking stick, and clearing aside leaves, Karen discovered one little patch after another and filled a basket with her drips and drabs. Bob's explanation for her success: "she's always got her eyes on the ground, looking for pennies." Later, when we got to Lost Pond, Bob moved into action. While we swam in the frigid water, he rigged his casting rod with live bait and hastily filled his stringer with smallmouth bass. They were so hungry for crawlers he hooked one every second or third cast. That night we feasted on pan-fried bass stuffed with sauteed chanterelles. At least we're seeing some mushrooms now, in a moister part of the woods, and the Fosters are getting mildly interested. "What's that big white one," Warren asks. "Looks like it should be good eating." We show them the death cap around the base, and tell stories about the poisonous but always-attractive amanitas. "A whole family was recently destroyed by eating amanitas," Barbara tells them: "two died within hours and one had her liver ruined for life."

"A little bite'll do ya," I have to add.

Then Gina says, "What about these little yellow ones?" There are three dried up chanterelles to the side of the trail, under white pines—good enough for them to get the idea but too old to pick. Excitement surges and we forget momentarily

how hot and sweaty we are, how hot this is for Vermont. We're looking doubly hard now as we descend an old logging road, grown over in quaking aspen and sumac, that leads to Lost Pond.

I'm reminded of a backpacking trip in the Adirondacks a few years earlier, with our daughter Meredith and two friends from England, William and Carol. It was several weeks into August of a dry summer similarly lacking chanterelles. We were ascending the north side of Mt. Algonquin and getting into some deeply-eroded trail of big boulders and plate granite, bordered by wind-stunted red spruce and balsam fir. As we scrambled up the tangle of rock and roots I kicked at something orange on the side of the trail, thinking it was a piece of orange peel dropped by a careless hiker. It shattered so easily I stopped to pick up a fragment—then called out in amazement, "a chanterelle—I just kicked a chanterelle!"

"Hey, Stupid! What did you do that for?" somebody quipped. We began to check the trail edges...and there they were, little patches, under spruces, high in the boreal, sub-alpine forest. We picked enough to make a chanterelle and noodle stew that night, with added flavor from wild ginger root and wood sorrel harvested near our lean-to. It was lucky foraging, too, because we had almost run out of food and that soup filled in the empty spaces.

Now, as we hike down into the little basin that holds Lost Pond we pass the stone foundations of old farm buildings—so completely decayed you can't tell which was the house and which the barn. Not a timber remains. The mushrooms and all the other members of nature's deconstruction crew have done their jobs well, turning culture into compost. There's meaning in that, I chuckle to myself, kicking a stump and hobbling, then skipping to regain my balance.



Artwork: Caroline Woods



I lead our little gang off the path, telling them there's a beautiful spring of clear, cold water I want them to meet. "It ushers right from the slate of the hillside and it'll chill your half-cooked gullets." Instead, we come to a dry stream bed and then the sandy-bottomed, arid spring head. I think of Robert Frost's poem "Directive" with its careful directions to find the spring by the abandoned farm house, to drink the waters at the frigid source and "be whole again beyond confusion." No such luck here—this spring is closed for the drought. Gina shouts, "I can see the pond, let's get swimming." We follow her, crashing through the pathless woods toward the blue water. Along the shore the bass are so numerous they swim along with us, as we walk the pond's edge. "They're like trained pets," Sally says. I kick myself for not bringing along my spinning rod.

Gina is ahead of us and I call—"Check out the pine needles under those big white pines. I've found them there before." There's a silence as she bends down, picks something yellowish, then straightens up saying, "maybe it's this. Could this be one?"

Barbara rushes ahead and then shrieks—"Yes—they're here—a bunch of them." She pulls plastic bags from her day pack and hands them around. Gina, Barbara and I stoop to the delectable task, cutting the stems and popping the pale-gold mushrooms into our bags.

Then from Sally and Warren, who are now in the next big grove of pines along the shore, "over here, more, dozens of them." I feel the adrenalin rising now and my head pounding. It's almost too much, happening too suddenly, like a feast after a fast. You've been without food for days, kept alive on water and thin gruel. Without warning it's over and your jailers arrive with the turkey banquet. But I keep picking. We all do. The afternoon sun, pouring and splintering through the lofty pine canopy, scatters into straw-shafts. Some of the light splashes on the bronze, pine-needled floor, bathing individual Chanterelles in a glowing bronze.

From Sally I hear, "I'd love this even if they weren't edible, but I hope they're as good eating as they are looking."

"You're in for a treat tonight you'll remember all winter," I reply. Even though there's no faerie ring, the patches spread out under the lofty pines and among birches at the pond's edge. We're so busy looking and picking there is no sound except the lapping of water along the shore and the two-noted whistle of chickadees.

It's hard to imagine a cool swim in a remote pond on a scorching day playing second to anything else, but it does. As we five splash about, chilling our toes and diving into the frigid depths, we can see those plump bags of chanterelles waiting on the shore. During our hike homeward the sun slides into a western cloud bank and we keep our lingering pond chill, stopping only briefly to pick those blackberries for a dessert.

Later, as we're circled around the big red table on the front deck, cleaning and cutting our harvest for sauteing, Maude walks by on the camp road below. She looks up and asks if the water was still cold in Lost Pond. (I stage whisper to the Fosters—"don't say anything about them," pointing at the bowls). We exchange neighborly pleasantries and she walks on, then,

almost as an afterthought, calls over her shoulder, "Did you find any chanterelles up there?"

"Oh, just a few, old, dried up ones..." Barbara's voice trails off, wistfully.

As Maude disappears I ask, "Now how the hell did she know we were hiking to Lost Pond?"

Barbara smiles, "Darned if I know. I might have mentioned at the store this morning that the Fosters were coming for a hike and swim. The rest is purely chanterelle intuition."

"I bet she'll be up there tomorrow morning with Edith, scouring those pine forests."

"You mean, the maples and birches along the shore. You're forgetting most of these came from under hardwoods."

"Don't you wish!" I rasp, rising to her bait, then gulping air to calm myself down. "Anyway, they won't find many."

"No, but maybe enough to zero in on... next summer."

An hour later, with citronella candles flickering on the deck and shrill katydid music in the maples, we sit down to chanterelle and cheese pizza, a pasta, tomato and sauteed chanterelle salad, and mugs of the local Long Trail Ale. We drink to the elusive chanterelle, and to finding the ring of gold next summer: "to the faerie ring!" Mugs clink, then we begin eating the edible essence of summer. Not wanting to put the Fosters on the spot with this, their first meal of wild fungi, we leave mushroom off some of the pizza. It's an unnecessary precaution, as we consume everything, including the cobbler made from those blackberries that grow on the logged-over hill side. Barbara has to jab me with the reminder, "We wouldn't have blackberries like these if that woods hadn't been cut over."

"Maybe not," I reply, "but I loved those big hemlocks and pines along the upper Rubicon. It'll never look like that again in my lifetime." As we clear the table and the Fosters prepare to leave, we have one last laugh—"Oh, just a few old dried up ones," Barbara repeats, then adds, "Would you like to take a basket of them home with you, we still have a lot?"

"I know," Sally replies, "but I never thought you'd offer."



Paul W. Birkeland

## *Stones and Stories*

What does a fifteen year old rock look like?

I stop to pick up a few while scuffling about the base of the steaming lava dome in the center of Mt. St. Helens' crater. I turn them over in my hand and try to see how they differ from the rocks in the gravel-lined turnout above Ryan Lake where I spent last night blanketed in coyote and frog songs. It's a stretch mostly. Perhaps the edges are sharper, the surfaces blacker, less dusty and pitted.

I realize, as I drop another rock clattering to the ground and look up over the jumbled rock garden of the crater floor, that nothing sensible will answer my question, because these lumpen rocks are just manageably sized surrogates for the setting itself, which exists on a scale that strains my comprehension. Standing in this landscape, some animal sense of mine, lurking in that dreamy space between memory and sensation, hears the echoes of the 1980 eruption ringing across the crater.

If landscapes speak to us, and I believe they do, it seems that this one has already cleared its throat and waits only for us to pay attention. Seldom in history had such a profoundly rearranged landscape as Mt. St. Helens laid itself at the doorstep of an audience so well educated and presumably prepared to appreciate it. Yet we seem to have been struck deaf at the eruption, and we've reduced the restructured land to a series of roadside viewpoints, another announcement on flights between California and Seattle. Mt. St. Helens is the kind of place about which myths are made. I was hoping I might find one there.

The trip to the lava dome climaxed a summer-long acquaintance I'd tried to make with the reordered landscape around the mountain, a landscape whose physical boundaries, I learned, defy the map. The Scorch Line, the margin of trees scorched in place at the farthest reaches of the hot gas cloud, defines a cartographically accepted outer limit for impacts from the eruption, but the dust cloud actually circled the globe. In the forest beyond the Scorch Line, patches of white pumice, those knobs of petrified volcanic froth, lie scattered among the living trees as if some giant had unevenly salted the earth. Farther out, a tent stake grinds into pumice beneath an inch or so of duff on the forest floor. Farther still, pumice, washed into lakes from surrounding slopes, became waterlogged and now lines the lake bottoms.

Beyond the lakes, a blanket of ash fertilized the farmlands of eastern Washington, and tons of silt flowed (and still flow!) down to the Columbia River and out to the Pacific. The line between living and dead forest seems a logical place to draw a fence around the affected lands, but, in a very material way, the eruption was a global event. The lines between landscapes seem fuzzy at best, and, on closer inspection, non-existent. It's not hard to believe that all landscapes are one and the same, submitting to division and mapping only because the cartographer ignores certain particulars in favor of some generally perceived order.

In August 1995, I joined a group of a dozen educators and geologists on a trip into the crater, a restricted area, led by Don Swanson as part of the Forest Service's public outreach effort. Don works for the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and had been one of the volcanologists on the scene when Mt. St. Helens erupted in 1980. He has one of the broadest and most complete understandings of the eruption's impacts. Don has a medium build with the leanness and bright eyes found on people whose work takes them outdoors. He has an open, elfin face that's easy to trust, nestled in a red-tinted beard.

We entered the crater through the breach in the north side of the mountain. When Mt. St. Helens erupted, rather than exploding vertically as everyone anticipated, it blew laterally, sending its entire north face rumbling down into Spirit Lake, and leaving a rugged tongue of ash and avalanche debris sloping down from the crater. A spire on the west side of the breach, slapped by crisp morning sun, presented a convenient cross section of the mountain's inner structure to us.

Pointing to this spire, Don called our attention to the dark dacite (DAY-site) that capped the spire and covered its outward-facing slope. Dacite is a thick, sticky magma that oozes like molasses out of some volcanoes, covering their lower slopes before hardening into a dull, black shell. Layer upon layer over millennia, it builds mountains, in this case Mt. St. Helens. Don pointed out how this black dacite gave way to almost white colored rock as you look down and in towards what used to be the inside of the volcano.

Don then turned to face the opposite side of the breach, and we strained squinty-eyed into the sun, where the monolithic silhouette of the east spire loomed over us. It was difficult to make out any details against the sun and sky, but later that afternoon I would be able to confirm what he told us; the east spire presents the same arrangement of black dacite supported by almost white rock beneath it.

The white rock is compressed and powdery, almost talc-like. Like the black rock above it, it too is dacite spread during some previous eruption. This dacite, however, ended up sitting in a hot water bath for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Hot water percolated through it for so long that its cohesive properties were destroyed, leaving it with all the tensile strength of a stick of chalk. Don's theory was that this corrupted dacite extended all the way across the north side of the mountain and had a lot to do with how and why Mt. St. Helens erupted the way it did. The admitted flaw in his theory is that there were no springs or thermal vents in this area before the eruption, no evidence of any hot water to do the corrupting.

"I'm building a story here," he continued, "so for now just keep all these things in mind as we go."

A story. I realized how much of my understanding about Mt. St. Helens' eruption was simply a reconstruction of events: the earthquake at 8:32:11 AM, the start of the landslide a few seconds later, the summit blast at 8:32:33, the blast through the landslide at 8:32:44, the mudflows, the ash clouds, the dewatering of the landslide debris. How satisfying it was now to hear cause and effect, to hear a story.



I began to see how important narrative is, not just to explain the land's form to ourselves, but to make us at home in it. Narrative makes us believe that the land is ultimately knowable. It sets our minds at ease, and allows us to call a frightful universe "home." But, just as with a map, our narratives can only exist if we ignore certain particulars in favor of some preconceived ideas. No single story can include all particulars; no story teller can tell the story of the universe but the universe itself. I held my place in Don's story as we continued through the breach on up into the crater towards the lava dome.

In all the videos and photographs I'd seen, the thousand foot high, crusted, black dome in the crater's center was the most obvious feature, but it wasn't so present in real life. The dome came and went like whiffs of sulfur as we wandered in and out of rock chutes and eroded gullies which shift and change with the spring melt each year. In still air, a vertical column of steam, visible over the gully walls and rounded rises on the crater floor, betrayed the dome's location. But most often the wind conspired with the gullies, flattened the column, and kept it out of sight.

Down in one gully, bands of ash and tephra made a gallery out of a forty foot stretch of the gully's wall. Stripes of burnt orange, pale gray, brown, and silver undulated in a tight formation with textures varying from a fine powder to a coarse sand, punctuated all over with abrasive chunks of pumice. On one end of the formation, a dark brown lens stared out of the stripes like an elongated eye. An ochre layer and a greyish-yellow layer separated at one corner of the eye, bent their separate paths above and below it, then rejoined just as smoothly as they parted, a foot and a half farther along on the other side. The geologists bandied theories back and forth like ping pong balls, trying to determine a sequence of rain, snowfall, rockfall, eruptions, and erosion that would explain the formation, but none of their speculations seemed ever to fit. Even I began to immerse myself in the fast-frame imaginings of snows, washes, and rockfalls. We finally all fell into a thoughtful silence broken by the clattering roar of a rockfall off the crater wall up ahead, before moving on.

Walking in the crater is tiring. Don assured us that for the first few years after the eruption the crater floor was as smooth as a billiard table. But for fifteen years the crater walls have tossed rocks down into the bowl like so much petrified granola. The search for a spot to place your foot with each step became mechanical, but never quite automatic.

As we picked our way towards the dome, I remembered another story I had read in several places, most completely in Ella Clark's *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*, about how and why Mt. St. Helens acts the way it does. It's a story told by the Indian tribes of southwest Washington and northwest Oregon. The details vary in the telling due to their origins in a rich oral tradition, but the essentials are clear. Two brothers, Pahto and Wy'east, and their peoples, once fought over the lands, each wanting the greater share of it. Finally, the Great Spirit separated the two brothers by putting a wide river, the Columbia, between them. But he also created a bridge, saying (in the Klickitat version), "I have built a bridge over the river, so that you and your people may visit those on the other

side. It will be a sign of peace between you. As long as you and your people are good and friendly with each other, this bridge of the Tahmahawis will remain."

It was a broad bridge, wide enough for many people and ponies to walk across at one time. For many snows, the people were at peace and crossed the river for friendly visits. But after a time the brothers and their peoples began quarreling again, demanding a greater share of the land and the fishing places. In punishment, the Great Spirit caused the sun not to rise, and the people on both sides were left cold and without fire.

When they realized what they had done, the people became sorry and the Great Spirit's heart softened. The people pleaded for fire again, and the Great Spirit asked an old woman, Loowit, who had avoided the fighting and whose lodge still held fire, to set her fire on the bridge for all to see, and to share it with all who asked. "Keep it burning on the bridge as a reminder of the Great Spirit's goodness and kindness," he told her. In return, Loowit was granted one favor. She asked to be young and beautiful again forever. "You will be young and beautiful again when the sun comes up," the Great Spirit told her.

Loowit took her fire to the bridge, and the people came from both sides to light their torches and take them home. Early the next morning, as the sun rose once again, Pahto and Wy'east noticed the fire and the beautiful woman watching it. They again became jealous of each other and began fighting, destroying the bridge over the Columbia. As punishment, the Great Spirit turned the brothers into mountains, Pahto into Mt. Adams and Wy'east into Mt. Hood. He turned Loowit into Mt. St. Helens so she would keep her youth and beauty forever, although she sometimes kept her old woman's habit of spitting mud and fire when she was angry.

I'm not part of the culture this story came from, so I can't say what meanings it originally held, but, even to me, it seems an intensely revelatory and insightful story. On a physical level, the story explains the landscape and the events that occur there—why the mountains exist, and why Loowit acts the way she does despite her lovely appearance. The tale also seems to delineate a moral and ethical code of conduct. The punishment for selfish actions by Pahto and Wy'east is not only visited upon those two, but upon all the people on both sides. It seems to say we all suffer when any one of us is selfish and greedy.

The story also suggests the universality of the human condition by saying that across the river there is a land just like our land, presided over by a mountain-god just like our mountain-god, populated with a people just like our people. We are so much alike that our fire comes from the same source. In doing so, it also makes common, life-giving tools (fire in this case) into holy gifts that shouldn't be so easily taken for granted. Who, taking this story to heart, could use fire again without thinking, for a moment at least, that once there was no fire? It belonged only to Loowit, who then gave it to us again. Finally, it inextricably links the people, the land, and their actions in a story that requires all three to make narrative sense and arrive at the world we have today.

It seems that to reveal these inner vistas, the land-



scape demands the immediacy and attentiveness of our presence, our immersion in our surroundings, some striving within the landscape. This hard-earned familiarity prepares us for revelation, and persuades the landscape to accommodate our presence and open its perspectives. I've come to believe that this is the way the landscape and the soul are linked, that unselfish exertion on the land opens our eyes and ears.

The Native Americans crisscrossed this land, fished here, picked berries, and peeled cedars. The landscape they called home shaped their habits, their cycles, and their society. They worked hard in the land and the land rewarded them with a rich and meaningful revelation. Don's story, too, though simpler, could only have been granted him after gaining some intimacy with the landscape—footfalls on the ash; gritty sandwiches under the inescapable sun. His theory could not have come from sifting through a computer printout. It required firsthand observation over time to be revealed. The details of his story are fixed in precise language, but they seem a product nonetheless of his striving in the land.

I wrestle with these stories, not because of their differences, but because of the ambiguous origin they share—the land. On one hand, I believe landscapes are inherently empty of meaning. They simply tell the stories and speak the truths we project upon them. But at the same time, I believe these truths belong wholly to the land, since, for some reason, we can't hear them any other way. So whose voice is it that I hear on the land? When I shout into a canyon, do I hear myself, or the canyon, in return?

At the base of the dome, Don directs us to look over the remaining walls of the crater. He points out fissures and serpentine layerings, records of shocks and previous eruptions, skewed features where rock plates slipped. But the thermally altered dacite doesn't extend much beyond the sides of the breach.

As Don speaks, I squat on the dome's lower slope, picking up rocks, searching for features they share, features they don't. I find myself trying to look into them, through them, behind them somehow. These fifteen year old rocks, which will see my footsteps erased by winter snows a thousand times over and still be considered young, are making their first clattering moves in their million year journey through history, and I'm trying to see their progress. Each stone's scars, its untraceable pockmarks, scrapes, and fractures, document an individual history that brought each stone to its site. Toppled by drifting snow, overwhelmed by spring melt, inch by clattering inch, individually and in monstrous stampedes, each stone commences a return to the sea from this place.

With such short, pristine histories behind them and such incomprehensible futures to come, the stones prompt me to leave their stories unmarked by my visit and, as I sit on my heels, I put each one I pick up back in the exact spot I found it. I begin lifting rocks more selectively, examining them mostly in place, disturbing them only when necessary to trace an odd marking around a buried edge or to test their heft in my hand. I consider taking a few rocks home with me, but I may never be back to return them, and I let them go.



Photo: Ron Scholl



It occurs to me that each stone could have a story, each grain of pumice a revelation attached to it, if only I sit here long enough. At that the landscape telescopes before me and opens out onto the stars. Patterns vanish like the warp and weft behind the rich colors of a Flemish tapestry, and a dazzling cloud of flecks and pebbles, spires and sky fills my vision. The world rears up immense and intricate, bogglingly full of incidental relationships accidentally formed. Swarms of unordered details rush up like a breaker on the beach and threaten to overwhelm me, but then I blink and everything settles back in place.

After leaving the dome, we navigate along the east side of the crater. Dropping down a small snowfield at the head of a gully, we carefully avoid a shaky looking snow bridge and regain terra firma right where a hot water stream named Loowit Creek flows out from the coarse tephra. It begins as little more than a damp spot in the sand, as if the earth were sweating, but grows in a few tens of yards into a respectable six foot wide creek. The gentle steam and timid breezes take turns reviving us, the steam kissing our cheeks and filling our nostrils, the breezes stirring cool air into the gully, then resting and letting the steam rise once again.

In areas where cold snowmelt mixes with the steaming hot water, masses of blue-green algae cling to the rocks in the creek bed, bobbing in the ripples and currents. A travertine spring feeds into the creek at one point, pushing back the bluish-green masses with a crisp golden-yellow mineral deposit on the rocks. I squat down and wash my scratched, dusty hands in the warm water. My whole body relaxes. Were it not for the lateness of the afternoon we would surely strip down and bathe. As it is, I barely resist splashing the warm water on my face in deference to the creek's high bacteria count.

The warm water of Loowit Creek so enthralled me that I almost missed the realization of the punch line it was. While there was no evidence of thermal springs on the north side of Mt. St. Helens to corrupt the dacite before the eruption, the presence of Loowit Creek in the crater today implies that some kind of hot water plumbing system exists within the mountain and that hot water springs or subsurface flow could have existed in the past. Don's story may hold water after all. Don doesn't explain this himself, leaving the realization to strike each of us individually with whatever impact it carries.

At the precipice where Loowit Creek drops 250 feet out of the crater to the pumice plains below, we stop a few minutes to take in the view before heading back down to the trail. The scene is markedly different from the views at the visitor centers and viewpoints. At those places the views are across the blast zone and there are always tree covered slopes in the distance that remain largely untouched by the 1980 eruption. From Loowit's lodge, there's no such comfort. The farther slopes are a stubby green and grey, and the nearer slopes are stripped bare of even the soil. Maps call it the "Devastated Area."

The glare of car windshields at the Windy Ridge Viewpoint four miles away catches my eye. To the people at the viewpoint, we're invisible, lost in the cataclysmic landscape. Likewise to us, even the crowds of them are too small to be

seen. I wonder, looking across the chasm to an unseen parking lot, if any one of us has another story for this place, a story that will explain to us how and where this event happened; not a technical how, but an intuitive how; not a geographical where, but a where in our consciousness, a where in our souls.

Fifteen years is a mote in geologic time. Even on a human scale it barely has consequence. Perhaps the storytelling is just now beginning for us, but it seems certain that if we are ever to find ourselves, if we are ever to hear the land's stories, we must live upon it attentively and compassionately, sweaty and dirty. Perhaps in time a forgotten language will return to us, and we will find ourselves a story once again.



Irma Ireland O'Brien

## Mythmaker

*Bears tread deeply in the human mind.* — Jeff Rennie

While we watched a midnight video, the house shook twice, groaned, and was still. "What was that?" We had heard no warnings of earthquakes. Alert and silent, we headed for the door and switched on the floodlights. Copper charged out with a roar and barked, breaking the night's silence. There, in the light, lumbered a great brown bear. It vanished into the black. Copper lunged down the steps, crossed the drive, and halted at the edge of darkness, tail, head, and hackles stiff. Frantic, we called her back. She came with our insistence, whined and growled when we shut her in the house. A pungent bear stench hung in the cool night air. We dared to go down and examined the prints, discovering the bear had ambled up our drive, put one giant paw on one garage door, and the other paw on the second door, and shook our house. But why?

The next morning my husband, Dan, learned that the bear had entered our neighbor's garage through the open door, wrestled out their freezer chest, and deposited it in their drive during the night. For some reason, the bear had not lifted the lid, instead it headed down our drive. Our freezer is also stored in the garage but, luckily for us, behind secure doors. During our eighteen years of living in Dillingham, Alaska, a small fishing town on the coast of Bristol Bay, off the Bering Sea, we have never confronted a bear in our yard. Now we have a neighborhood bear, a night raider with a nose for the fish in our freezer.

We have learned from the Yup'ik Eskimos and experiences at fishcamp that we can't be too careful when it comes to heading, gutting, and disposing of the salmon. Cutting planks need to be thoroughly cleaned, then wash water and all the remains returned to the sea. We store our processed fish in tight lidded white buckets out near the beach or else we become bear bait.

Our first fishing season in Ugashik, I discovered the hard way, when I woke up in a shaking cabin. Awake in the dim chill, my head whirled when I heard and felt something chewing the corner of the cabin and stomping over the front stoop. The day before, we had salted salmon using the lee of the cabin to protect us from the biting sand and the forty-knot, offshore winds that hurled over the bluffs. Unintentionally, we left the fish beside my cabin in their sealed buckets.

When I was a child caught in bad dreams, I would stay death-still, the animals would go away. But the cabin bumped and swayed. How could I wake my partners in the wall tent close by? I slid out of my bag, dashed to the counter by the door, and slammed together two cast iron skillet. That silenced the night. A long silence. I caught my breath and dared to open the door. No bears. I sneaked out and looked up to see the marauders sitting above on the twenty-foot bank, peering at me in the eerie morning light like two giant teddy bears. Curly and Moe, two three-year-old brown bears that had pes-

tered us most of that summer. They showed no hint of fear, only curiosity as they sat, stared, and sniffed the air. But I still wore my fear and yelled for Kevin who quickly emerged in his shorts and socks.

"Get outta here," he yelled and ran for the four-wheeler. Once started, he herded the juveniles from below the bank as they reluctantly ambled along the top toward the tundra ponds. We were all too inexperienced—the bears and us—to know what to do, how to react to each other.

Over the years we have co-existed with the bears. They have their time with the salmon and washed-up seal carcasses during the night high tides. We respect their trails and where they drag the rotting seals. They respect our machines and our lights when we have to work the same night tides to pick our nets. We maintain a mutual curiosity from a safe distance.

Bear tracks! Copper's sniffed out large fresh tracks of bear during our evening walk. Several days have passed since Copper was lured into the creek on her first fish chase when a salmon dashed through the shallows. Since then, we have followed the fresh tracks of fox. I searched for fall migrants and she sought the salmon spawnouts. Four red salmon have reached the upper stretches of Squaw Creek, where it meanders ten miles through sunken troughs of tundra, grass, forest, and flatlands of bog and marsh. The creek empties into an enlarged silted slough that spills into Nushagak Bay. With the second largest system of rivers and lakes in Bristol Bay, they are prime spawning grounds for the sockeyes. Death follows spawning in diverse ways, slow deterioration to a flash of talons or gnashing teeth. Those spawnouts have attracted hunters and scavengers on padded paws and silent wings. Fox, eagles, ravens, and gulls have joined us in the search. Now, most exciting, we follow bear.

The spotless blue sky softens with twilight as Copper and I follow a narrow section where the creek flows between the trees. We hear a splash around the bend, out of sight. I grab Copper. She sits quivering. We listen. Is it the fox that felt the tundra quiver at our approach and jumped the creek? Did the beaver dive for its tunnel? Did a spawnout make a dash through the shallows? Or could it be a bear, startled from its meal of salmon, testing the air as we wait?

Blood pounds my ears. After endless seconds, we ease around the bend. We stop. Nothing moves. Nothing can be seen or heard. I let Copper go. Nose to ground, she snuffles the grass on the banks. Then I spot the sculptured remains of a salmon in a pool—a partial head and lower jaw trailing ribbons of skin. First remnant of a spawnout. It's not fresh. There is no skin, body or flesh. It lies a good stretch down the creek from Copper's initial chase. I search the banks for more remains or any signs, like a flash from a pool. After a couple of bends, following the creek, I spy another spawnout under an overhung bank. In the shadows of that pool it hides steady in the depths, scarcely moving, leaving no scent. Its gills pulsate. Its tail trails rotting pieces, and its fins are lined white with flesh. A deteriorating specimen. What keeps it alive? This is the time when the stiff or rotting carcasses litter the shallows



and sandbars of the rivers and creeks. Did this salmon spawn? Copper works the banks further up the creek I follow, knowing there will be no more sockeye chases for her this fall.

Also, this fall I hear distressing stories about how bears are treated at the dump. Apparently people drive out to the dump in the late evenings to watch as many as fourteen brown bears feed. One bear was run over by a crazy observer. On another night, when the police came to investigate, they had to finish off a young bear whose jaw had been broken by someone's potshot. Fish and Game have a hard job protecting Alaska's biggest game from these wild men whose fear and ignorance have turned the brown bear into a killer, attacking for its own survival.

The bears now come to the dump, to the creek, to our house. What has happened to all the fish and berries? Why the dump? Is there no more landfill, or Federal grant money for the city to afford to cover the stench? Did we have to stop burning garbage because of air pollution? The bears have acquired a taste for our garbage. Now the dump is closed after six and on weekends to keep them safe from us.

Years ago I heard a translated conversation from the old men, Eskimo hunters at the elders' conference. These elders sat in the pristine comfort of the new Senior Citizen Center to talk about their lives, "The things we did long ago." This was the first official elders' conference, with language specialists from the University of Alaska officiating. Their sagging faces were lit by sunlight streaming through icicles and the scrubbed conservatory windows, surrounded by green plants, they sat in rattan furniture. The men wore rumpled trousers and mis-buttoned flannel shirts. One old timer exposed snoose-stained underwear. Some appeared to be held together by their stretched red suspenders. The women, in contrast, were a colorful entourage, wearing calico kuspiks, pullovers, with attached skirts trimmed with bright rickrack worn over polyester pants. Some wore babushkas and all had well-worn, beaded, sealskin and fur slippers or mukluks. The elders looked comfortable but sleepy as we listened to the welcomes and instructions of the translators about the proceedings for the next two days.

The conference coordinator designated me to record the men's sessions. We gathered in a room where they pushed back the tables and chairs and sat in a circle on the floor. I monitored the tape recorder. Each speaker scooted toward the center when it came his turn to share stories of hunting caribou, moose, and beluga; failures and successes, how they made and used their hunting spears and harpoons. With each new story the men became more lively until someone mentioned bear. Then they fell silent—reluctant to talk about how they hunted bear.

Finally, speaking softly, an old man from Manokotak with coke bottle glasses and gray crew cut, said: "There is a saying that bears can hear you when you think and talk about them. After all they are our ancestors. We hear some still hunt bears, but not in the old way. Gone are the Eskimo ways," he said in his quiet manner. "Gone are our ways of showing respect for our brothers, the bear."

The translator searched for words, repeating the story after each pause. "Those ways are gone with the coming of the light skins," he translated. "Those loud, hairy men came in large, winged kayaks and took the otters and seals. The white men came and came. Now they have the land. They came with iron arms and traps. They built cold, barren huts. They came with their papers and books, religion, and laws."

"Gone are our Yup'ik laws, our teachings of respect for the animals and land," he ended. "Gone to the graves of our elders."

Another man spoke in English. He rose, placed a thumb under his suspenders, and his voice boomed from beneath his hawk nose, "This is for the best I hear some say. But my fear is that our young men have learned to hunt out of greed. They fear that if they don't get their meat, there won't be any left under the white man's laws. That's why they even shoot bear."

These old hunters had not forgotten the wise ones who knew how to hunt for caribou, seal and salmon within the bear's territories, alongside their brother. Only in the time of starvation did the Eskimo take bear to save his people. Only if the proper respect was shown, did their brother allow this.

"When you skin a bear you don't know whose cousin it might be." Long silence followed this statement made by the elder from Koliganek with the cataract eyes.

Another bright, cool October Saturday, no reason to stay in. The dirt and dust can keep till it rains. Copper and I take our longest walk following the fox and bear trail up the creek. I search for signs of bear, scat and flattened grass where it sleeps. Copper sniffs the banks along the creek, stops, lifts her nose testing the air, and dashes ahead. My boots crunch through the frozen moss crossing the bogs by the edge of the flats. Skim ice clings to the edges of Squaw Creek's pools. Frost decorates the grass and moss on the banks where the waters hum and breathe over the shallows. A water plant of lush green still blooms, tiny white flowers waving gently in the flow of the depths. A creekmaid with green tresses, she bathes in the sun's last warm rays displaying her star blossoms. Last night when that cold, white moon filled the black, it was Tunghak, Keeper of the Game. As his frigid gaze spread, the Creekmaid's fingers gripped the edge of ice, holding back that freezing blanket. Now her tips darken with decay. Still she blooms as she dies. Soon she too will sink and fade into a frozen sleep.

When we reach the Manokotak trail, I follow its worn trough north to the woods to look for the crossbills. Four golden-crown kinglets and a brown creeper forage through the spruce. I hear a sharp "peek" and follow it to flush a hairy woodpecker from a dead birch. As I stand and wait for more new sounds, Copper crashes through the underbrush on a wild scent. Her rampage creates an explosion of feathers heading right for me. At the last second a frenzied bird veers and lands on the lower limb of a spruce. A roughed-up male spruce grouse, frozen to the limb, stares at me. The dog rushes by, totally unaware of her bird-in-tree. She's berserk with the scent on the ground and knows there's bound to be more. I watch and wait too. But she finds no more of these grouse. The one in the



spruce eyeballs her with twisted neck, releasing low chuckles. These are the dodos of the woods and roadsides. We can kill them with a rock because they flush and freeze within sight of their predators. Maybe they're safe this deep in the woods. But along the lake road where they eat gravel for their crops, they are easy pickings for fall hunters on early morning drives.

I can't call Copper from her quest, so I leave the woods for the second beaver dam. Sitting on a knoll of lichen and moss, I wonder where the bear would nap and search to find two snipe feeding on an island of grass across the pond. Further up, the pond narrows to become a broad, quiet creek. Two pairs of mallards suck the green scum of decaying plants. I hear a snort, feel the tundra shake, and turn as Copper greets me with her toothy grin. She lies down panting, licks a front paw, and sticks her nose in the air. Two snorts and she's off again to flush all the birds along with a pair of green-winged teals I had not seen.

Rolling onto my stomach to soak up the warmth of the sun, I listen to the wind.

Photo: Ron Scholl



The wind rattles the dried alder bushes, rolls and flattens the tundra grass, and hurls the leaves from the willows. If I could fly and run loose with the wind, I would swish creek spray over the beaver dam and blow rings across the pond. It's a perfect day for wings. To catch a gust, swirl up the trees, over the ridge, and ride the currents, searching for ravens. The wind flattens and scatters frisbee clouds. They race over the horizon and leapfrog Warehouse Mountain. Even the moon settles back on its waxing crest and sails overhead.

Today's northwesterlies sweep the birds away. There are none to be seen or heard as I ride the winds. Rejuvenated, I rise and whistle for Copper. On the way back, I stop where the creek narrows, cascades, and whirlpools, sinking to disappear under a tunnel of grass. Ice surrounds the cascades—a starburst of frozen blades—expands in all directions. In the center, the ice is inches thick, fusing single stalks of grass into nature's sculpture. Odd to peer into this frozen phenomenon on a bright, sunny day with temperatures in the high forties. Copper and I continue our quest for the salmon spawnouts and bear on the lower stretches closer to home. No fresh tracks, her interest has waned. The scent and memories grow too old. Mouse tunnels are her new diversions. She snorts, shoves her nose under the moss, and flags her tail. I search, still pondering where the spawnouts hide and the bear naps. They, the ducks, and the

creekmaid are the last remnants of summer.

Our walk this evening is later than usual. The sun has set, the October sky burns clear. There's no time to meander with the creek. Our feet crunch the frozen tundra and echo off the trees as we walk up the hill toward the edge of the forest. Copper snorts, stops short, testing the air. Just behind I stop and catch my breath in the quiet. Its too quiet. Copper freezes. I exhale and follow her look to a face in the shadows. A bear's face. Copper rumbles. Hackles up, flanks quivering, her eyes meet mine. Facing the bear, she stiffens and growls. My stomach jumps and sinks, my heart pounds my ears. Frozen, I look from dog to bear, but too late. In these fading shadows only an image remains. Did we see him in this halfflight? No doubt. Copper stands tense, shaking, eyes penetrating the trees. "Heel, Copper!" I turn and leave. She lifts her nose, sniffs twice, and slinks about with sunken head and tail. The woods crash back as we retreat toward the creek.

We are in the cycle of frozen full moon nights, skim ice, and crusty tundra that won't hold our weight. Copper lies whimpering in her sleep, dream chasing with twitching feet, still pursuing the spawnouts or the smell of bear. I write, still humbled about the fear that paralyzed me when I saw the bear. At only a brief shadow, my fear exploded within. A fear for Copper if she charged up and challenged the bear to protect me. An image of Copper being slammed to the ground and ripped open with a deadly swipe, me screaming helplessly at the bear. I created that fear. My mind lost control when my eyes connected the dog and the bear.

What happened? I had listened to the Eskimo stories and read the books. Aware of the ways of *taquaq*, I tried to think like a brown bear. At fishcamp, I respected their paths, and felt I could infringe on their boundaries and still be safe. Always I walked the high ground—open spaces of the ridges and bluffs where I could watch for bears. I knew to sing, whistle, or clap in tight places where I could not see—never to surprise a bear. This summer, I had rested on a knoll of Cape Graig, focused through my binoculars, and watched a sow with her three cubs. I knew to stay away from their territory. If ever there was an encounter, I knew to drop to the ground in a ball, to cover my head and ears with arms and hands and play dead.

"Never run. Any quick motion will only anger a brown



bear for the chase." I have been humbled by the bear and know what the Eskimo means. "The power of The Great One is beyond our understanding."

In *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, I have read there are select ones who have seen the bear's soul—his inua. Long ago an *angalkuq* (shaman) was out checking his traps when he and his dogs surprised a bear. The dogs tore toward the bear as the shaman turned to grab his bow from the sled. When his back was turned the dogs' barking ceased. The Eskimo spun about in time to see a face peering from the bear's right eye. Before he had time to react, the silent dogs parted, allowing the bear to escape into the trees. The shaman returned to his village where he carved a mask, a bear's head with a face peering through black hair from the right eye socket. He created a song with words he didn't understand that had been passed to him by the bear. That night he celebrated and shared his story to the beat of the drums in the *qasgiq*—the men's house. From that time on, his people showed a great respect for him. He now had the power of the bear.

We found no more spawnouts this fall. Not a trace. Perhaps they were caught by the bear and eaten to the very last scale. Or they died and sank to the depths of a hidden, dark pool to remain, trapped at the bottom, swirling under the currents. The salmon have ended their cycle, spawned, and gone.

During these short, sharp days, Copper, the fox, and I will pursue the trails along winter's creek. The bear's time will soon become too short to wander the creeks, to investigate our neighborhood and garages. It will strip the berries from the bushes and nap in the last warm patches of sun, waiting for the northwesterlies, their time to head for the hills, the high country of snow, to locate a den. Perhaps our bear has left us—Copper with her dreams and me with my writing—our legends until the next brown bear.

Footprints in the tide, fill and fade,  
tracks lumber up the bank and out,  
out into the fog, over the stretches of white,  
heavy paws mount the hills and disappear.  
Abandoned to Arctic winds, bearing the legends  
of MYTHMAKER to heal, to hear and know,  
to transfer his strength to the brave,  
Gone to the spirit world,  
so the ancients say.

Back then—a long time ago—  
the Eyaks called him Elder Brother.  
He showed them how to hunt and what to eat.  
They survived the seasons together,  
in the days of long sun, when rivers  
of white birds flowed to sea.  
That's the way it was,  
since time began.

In the autumn—sometime ago—  
the sun lost its way, turned to cold and ice,  
the birds vanished, the squirrels burrowed deep.  
In that long time of hunger, Elder Brother  
rendered fat, meat, warmth, then disappeared.  
The little brothers lost *The Legend of the Long Sleep*.  
That secret during the time of freeze  
became an empty sleep.

Many people here now—  
Yup'iks, Tlingits, and their kin, show respect  
for Elder Brothers—spirits of their grandfathers.  
Speak too loud in their presence,  
you could become one with them.  
Shaggy capes and wooden masks clap,  
chant, and sway—distant lone figures dance,  
drifting into legends  
with the Eyaks.



Robert E. Druchniak

## To Admit to Oneself

Thinking back to my childhood, I realized even then I had some mixed feelings about hunting. My father wasn't a hunter, he worked for a meat-packing company in Detroit. But my uncle hunted, and he once asked my Dad to butcher a deer he'd shot. Its carcass hung in our garage while my Dad worked removing cuts of meat. The pungent odor of the deer carcass filled the air. Several, frighteningly large dogs paced hungrily at our gate. I wished both deer and dogs to be gone. During the summer, I would walk the busy streets to the Detroit River with fishing pole in hand. I fished with a collection of night-crawlers, and from the first yank on the line to the twisting jolts of the writhing fish, I was electrified. But the fish I caught would often swallow the worm so that removing the hook was usually an abdominal ripping that not only killed the fish, but my appetite for any later consumption. Not until years later, when I went to work in Wyoming, did I think I might enjoy hunting.

The dry, wind-seared plains of southwest Wyoming did not seem a likely place for sustaining wildlife, yet I saw an abundance of antelope and deer, prairie dog and magpie. I lived at an altitude of sixty-eight hundred feet. The lack of trees enabled me to see for miles, and the dry climate produced a thirst that was difficult to quench. But it didn't detract from the electric-blue sky and its shades of rose and lilac at the close of a day. Nor did I ever tire of the immense view of land provided at any hilltop. A midwestern flatlander, from the confinement of a metropolis, I had been smitten by the western landscape. Hunting provided a way to get closer to the land.

I began working for the oil industry. My co-workers and I shared the ride to work, twelve miles of dirt road carved out of sagebrush and hillside. The moose and beaver we'd see were occasions to stop the truck to watch, but the deer and antelope were so plentiful, acknowledgment was a mere turn of the head. They were hunters, and much of our conversation revolved around hunting. Hunting stories they told were bold and filled with swagger. I wanted to be able to tell my own stories. I was eager to hunt and fish in Wyoming.

One evening that fall, I was fishing below the dam of the reservoir for trout. I'd been 'skunked.' While I drove the six miles of dirt road leading back to the highway, I cursed my luck. The light was flat from heavy cloud cover and the shortened days carried a chilling prelude to winter.

I gunned the old truck up a steep grade of lonely road. Without backing off the pedal I descended the other side at a good clip, surpassing any safe speed by twenty miles an hour. Two-thirds of the way down the hill, I saw an antelope starting to cross the road near the top of the next rise. I maintained my speed, allowing plenty of time for the animal to get to safety.

Tires flung gravel, pinging sharply against fenders and bumpers. The buck halted, but I wasn't stopping. I began to slow, sixty, fifty-five, fifty. He seemed calm as he watched my approach. *For Christ sake*, I thought, and blew the horn. He

turned for the roadside. Forty-five, *this will be close*. Time seemed to close around us, he moved as hesitantly as I did deliberately. Metal slammed against hide. From my mirror, I saw his rear legs buckle beneath him. By the time I stopped and got out of the truck, he was up and running into the sagebrush but his gait was badly hampered. While I stood in the road staring out into the bleak landscape, I vowed never to tell a soul what had happened.

Through two seasons of hunting, deer continued to elude me. I invited my brother, Tom, and his son, Eric, to experience hunting in Wyoming. Tom, an avid hunter, had six years of military training and is a true marksman. He made a difficult shot look easy as he filled his deer tag on opening day. When my opportunity arose the shooting wasn't so clean.

On the leeward half of a saddle-shaped ridge, yellow leaves of quaking aspen partially shielded a young buck. My first shot caught him lifting his head. It punctured the bridge of his nose. He began to run and my second shot entered his flank. Another discharge broke his rear leg. His running became piteous as his leg flailed behind him. Tom yelled to move closer. The deer stood with his head turned watching me as I approached winded and shaking. I knelt down and fired twice, but only succeeded in disemboweling him as he moved another fifty yards dragging entrails. The final bullet entered his lung while he stood staring away from me, tongue hanging, waiting to die. I was sick, but I wouldn't let anyone know. We took pictures of the momentous occasion, and while cleaning the visceral cavity we counted the bullet entries. I tried to convince myself that being a hunter meant trying improve my hunting skills and, though I did not enjoy the ugly kill, I accepted those circumstances as part of the experience.

The following year, when hunting season arrived, I hunted alone. I drove to areas where I had noticed deer just a few weeks before. I walked from late afternoon to dusk. The slightly resinous aroma of juniper trees whisked along with the breeze. Out in the open, a series of deerless, sage-covered hills were slowly revealed as I weaved my way through the rugged brush. Sunlight felt enjoyably warm and its low angle on the landscape reflected a clarity so pure I gaped in wonder, then shadows deepened extolling the night. With little sign of deer, I returned to where I parked the truck. Reaching for the door handle, I heard the wings of a bat vibrating the air as it nose-dived for insects. I drove home with the window down and the heater on, wishing I had brought my sleeping bag.

On weekends, I enjoyed walking out of the house with a thermos full of hot coffee and feeling the cool air and darkness of 4:00 a.m.. I would purposely walk past the street-lamp in front of our house to see Orion hanging on the southern horizon, and I couldn't help the pleasant feeling of driving through town on deserted streets. Hunting, I was sitting on an east facing slope, my back against sagebrush, watching starlight fade while the sun lit the world brighter. A timeless season melded into winter.

The start of the next deer season contrasted sharply: orange vested hunters conspicuously claimed several vantage point and rifle shots cracked through the morning air. I walked until I reached a rock outcrop overlooking a long, steep hill-





Photo: Ron Scholl

side, boulder strewn and heavily dotted with juniper. Tears welled in my eyes as cold wind whipped my face. My body quivered from both the chill of the morning and the excitement of the hunt.

I peered through binoculars. Long shadows in the early light caused me to focus more intensely. I saw the deer lying under a large juniper, holding his head high, watching me. The visible half of his antlers formed a wide, prominent curve from his head. My quivering grew to a tremble while I found him again through the scope of my rifle. Wildly, my heart beat; blood thumped in my head. I exhaled completely and the recoil jerked the rifle up. Lowering it, I found him standing, looking straight at me. I lost him after the second report. Several seconds elapse and the powerful look we shared was gone. Instinctively, I ran down the hill energized by the hunt, fear, blood thirst, elation and sadness. He was lying dead, shot perfectly through the neck.

A season later, I sat atop a ridge overlooking a sea of sage with my friend and hunting partner, Bruce. Our hunting permits were for doe only. We had been watching the movements of a distant herd of antelope, when at the crest of a small hill a large buck antelope began walking toward us. We kept

very still except for the up and down movement of binoculars. Prominent dark markings graced both sides of his head, the gentle curve of stout horns indicative of stature among his herd. Distinctive bands of cream and sandstone brown around his neck matched the tone of his surroundings. His large, dark, keen eyes watched us cautiously as he stepped closer, exposing his compact and powerful flank.

The antelope was halfway up the ridge from which we watched. I felt a fine honor to be so close to such a magnificent animal. It was as if he had something to say to all of creation and he was choosing to say it in the midst of his biggest predator. He stood at the top of the ridge, glanced over his shoulder at us, then gazed out over the hollow. For what seemed like minutes, he stayed twenty yards away. He appeared god-like, champion of his domain, protector of his breed. Then bellowing a guttural cry, he loped down into the hollow, changing his gait as we rose to our feet, plumes of dust trailing hooves. The power of freedom—the power to change. I laid my rifle down that day.



Robert A. Druchniak

## *The Present as Place*

I awoke one day before dawn. Stepping out the back door with the dogs, I gazed at star-lit heavens with thoughts of my dad when he was young and alive. Suddenly, a ball of white streaked beneath the stars, an unusually bright flash that left a trail of electrons glowing for seconds behind it. In my mind he will always be young. Traveling the universe of the mind I kick up star dust trails along the way.

I wasn't going to hike that day. I had too many things to do: tests to grade, the yard needed work, and the truck an oil change. Time seemed to become increasingly scarce. But I hadn't been out in weeks, nor had the dogs, and when they saw me with their leashes nothing could contain their excitement. Tessie threw her head back and lifted her ninety-pound frame with each bellow, while Gus whirled around roaring his approval. All work was postponed, enough time is scarce indeed.

We began the hike with cool air beginning to warm while the sun ascended. The initial hill we climbed was marked by deep, twin ruts from vehicles scrambling the steep rise. We had often hiked this beaten path that cuts through sage and dwarfmaple. Gus and Tessie sniffed the familiar trail—their ancestry told them it was time to flush birds. A robin trilled while clutching a branch of budding serviceberry, then a marsh hawk loomed from the sloping terrain below, prompting the robin to flee. The hawk glided low overhead, searching silently.

I decided to climb beyond the hill we usually roamed to one that towers above it. Leaving the road, my feet felt cushioned from soil that exhaled pent up winter breath. Meadowlark sang, Tessie panted at my heels, and Gus loped between sagebrush. Spring pumped through my veins. I wondered how I'd become so enamored with the outdoors.

I don't recall my dad ever expressing a great love for the outdoors, although I'm fairly sure he harbored those feelings. Eight children, each demanding his time, left precious little for personal endeavors. In summer, he and my Mom would pack us all in the station wagon and drive out to the lake. We'd swim all day and eat burgers cooked over a charcoal grill. Summer evenings were rare that you wouldn't find him sitting on the front porch sipping coffee or a cold beer. He became interested in the game of golf, and after I entered high school he bought me a set of used clubs. Several times we played the game together. I don't think I ever saw him more relaxed, or enjoy himself more, than when he was walking the tree-lined fairways pulling cart and clubs behind him.

The dogs ran ahead. As we neared the peak, I noticed a flat-topped rock next to my boot. I bent down for a closer look and marveled at its surface that displayed numerous, tiny fossil shells. Looking out at the surrounding landscape I thought of the staggering amount of time that has elapsed; the sea that once covered this land, the creatures that flowed over it through the watery atmosphere, and the ages of history recorded in rocks by brachiopods—history the sun remembers as only yesterday.

From the peak, a rocky ridge begins that extends along its south side. The conglomerate rock, or pudding stone, graduates in exposed heights. As I descended, ankle, knee, and head-high rock jutted out, forming two parallel ridges. Walking between these jagged walls I felt an empathy for ancient explorers, inheritors and intruders. Weathering has produced peep-hole arches in this stony fortress. Gazing through these natural windows, I was stirred by ancient instincts as four deer browsed on a distant hill. Every dozen feet or so I climbed atop a rock, exposing a rolling blanket of sage to view.

At the highest point of the distended rock, a crest of about thirty feet, I saw a portion of a nest on a ledge directly below. To gain a better look, I walked around to the base. Hardy vegetation scraped at my knees. I stepped carefully. From the size of the nest it appeared to be one of a raptor, perhaps an eagle I imagined. It occupied the whole ledge, looking castle-like over its dominion.

Nature has often impressed my mind's eye. After they married, my parents left western Pennsylvania and moved to Michigan. Each year our family drove back to my parents' home state to visit relatives. Dad seemed to love to drive through those eastern hills and mountains—roads winding through tall forests, pine-filled aroma blowing through open windows. Landscape never appeared so absolutely green. And as the forest edged closer to road, its intriguing darkness ignited my imagination. I was spellbound by its beauty.

Looking south of the nest, dazzling snow covered peaks of the Uinta Range pierced the deep blue sky. To the west, rectangular patches of ground looked starkly vacant, remnants from the removal of house trailers gone looking for the next oil boom. I also came here as the result of the surging economy and never thought I'd stay very long, fourteen years ago. Thoreau had written, "We have advanced by leaps to the Pacific, and left many a lesser Oregon and California behind us."

I called for the dogs and we followed a small deer-tracked trail down along the western slope. A campfire pit ringed with stones suggested star-bright evenings for cowboy poets or lovers of the night. I smiled thinking of the time I've spent backpacking these western hills and mountains, lying at night and being lulled to sleep in a rain-pelted tent, or watching alpenglow on rock-faced peaks as the sun sank low.

The deer trail connected with the road and we began to retrace our steps back to the house. I turned around slowly to view ancient stone, hills, and sky. It is there for the mind, it is there for the spirit. My Dad died at forty-six. Even those things that would seemingly go on forever come to a halt. Yet, what a stunning achievement, when in the midst of our existence we blaze as bright as stars.



Tommy Youngblood-Petersen

## The Oneness of Two

*Our future starts when we begin honoring the dreams of our enemies while staying true to our own.*

William Kittredge, *Who Owns the West?*

**I**t all started with bear scat.

My family recently moved to a rural area of Montana from Missoula, a small city twenty miles away. We purchased a home on about four acres of yellow-bellied Ponderosa Pines and thickly-coned Douglas Firs. The property rises behind us and merges with thousands of acres of state and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. You can walk from our home up the hills and over Mineral Ridge of the Garnet Range and down to the Big Blackfoot River, probably fifteen miles, all on public land.

By mid-October the larch in the higher elevations were beginning to color, the strange sight of "evergreen" needles turning bright yellows and translucent yellow-greens. The Oregon holly, low to the ground, burnished a rich, cordovan red.

The first visitors to our new home had just arrived, two sisters who had driven up from the dry deserts of Nevada through Salt Lake. They were eager to stretch their legs and weary road bodies, so we decided to walk an old two-track road that winds on the contour uphill from our home. From the map I saw that it ambles through miles of forest and past Dirty Ike Creek, Game Creek, and Bear Creek.

The slope of the road is gradual, and we took the kind of hike where you can move easily and not really pay attention to where you're going. You can talk without having to concentrate on landing your next step, the road leading you along. The two-track switches back and forth, plunges into deep, cool granite-walled folds, then gently bends out into the light and warmth of southern exposures. I had walked this road just once before, but not far, and we were soon in unfamiliar territory. After a few minutes I stopped and pointed downhill.

"If you look closely, down through the woods, you can see our house from here," I said to Loveeta and Leah. We peered through the thick green pines and could barely make out the slate-blue tin roof of our octagonal house.

"After awhile we'll just bushwhack our way down from the road back to the house," I said, "It's a little steep, but not too bad."

They nodded, said nothing, and we walked quietly, easily, around the next bend. And then we saw it. From thirty yards away we could see a large clump of something, we couldn't tell quite what, just off the side of the road. As we walked to it, the realization of what it was slowly took form.

It was the first bear scat I'd ever seen. And I never imagined it to be so massive. Five large chocolate brown cylinders, two inches in diameter, eight inches long, lay on the ground in front of us. The moment I saw it piled there, I knew it was unmistakably bear; no other scat I'd seen was of this size or shape, and so human-like. It was perfectly formed, as if coming out of a cylindrical mold, beginning and ending sharply, perfectly.

The spoor glistened, reflecting the short time it had been there, and we froze, knowing the bear was not far away. We

turned our heads slowly, bodies motionless like owls, looking for bear himself. The still forest revealed nothing, so we quietly stepped closer to the sign. It was filled with mashed, pastel-purple elderberries and scarlet red mountain ash berries, with sprinklings of light green grasses and grubs. These colors in the deep brown droppings made it, frankly, beautiful. It was fall, and bear was stocking up for the long winter ahead.

We then came to that kind of focused, crystalline awareness that we weren't the largest species moving through these woods. We knew encounters with black bears usually weren't dangerous, but we also kept staring at this huge bear scat, knowing, with all due respect, that a huge bear had produced it.

"What do we do if we see one," Loveeta whispered, glancing around, "stand tall and try to scare it away?"

"No way," Leah, answered. "You do that with mountain lions. Just freeze, don't look the bear in the eye, and try to slowly move away. More than likely it'll run from us."

"Right, right," Loveeta said a bit nervously, and then she asked quickly, "Do you think it's a grizzly?"

"No, I really don't think so," I replied. "Griz live in the Missions, the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and a few in the Rattlesnake range. Those places aren't far from here, and although bears travel and need a lot of habitat, I don't think griz live here."

Loveeta visibly relaxed. "You know, I've never seen a bear before," she said pensively. "Maybe we'll get to. Oh, I hope we get to."

The next day we hiked to the spot again, this time with my wife, Beth. Loveeta took close-up photos, Beth standing next to the brown cylinders in her sky blue and gray hiking boots, to provide perspective. Over the next week I brought our two sons, Evan (12) and Campbell (6), to see it. Their eyes widened, not of fear, but of amazement. Now we all felt intricately tied to this large creature, almost as if it was "our" bear, and we proudly showed the pictures and talked about the bear to whomever would listen. Not everyone would.

**I**n the first weeks here my family and I began to explore the land around us, venturing slowly out from our home, each time a little farther, like concentric rings. We desired to know this place through the land.

We moved to be closer to the animal world — besides the black bears that amble the hillsides, coyotes sing their presence, and mountain lions prowl the ridges just across from our home. Nuthatches, finches, and blue iridescent Steller jays chorus their sweet morning song, offering relief from the cacophony of ambulances and traffic of our former Missoula neighborhood. We moved to get out of the Missoula valley's winter air inversions that can send particulate counts high and are especially bad for small children. We didn't move onto our four acres with the naive notion of "living off the land." We just sought a quieter life, a bit simpler life. We didn't want to tend a standard, square, city lawn anymore.

What we didn't see in the real estate ads or pre-sale visits, maybe naively, was a hunting and gun-toting culture, a tight rural community that frequents The Last Hole Bar. The bar is just a few miles from Miner's Creek Road, where we moved. Shortly after moving in, Beth saw a freshly killed bighorn sheep paraded around in a pickup from the school to the local market to The Last Hole, like goods pillaged by a conqueror. She broke down and cried. We walked through clearcuts that turned our stomachs, and we heard gunshots up



Photo: Kelley Segars



in the mountains long before hunting season began, then saw pickups rumbling down Miner's Creek road past dusk, headlights dimmed.

At first glance, it is two seemingly different cultures and values — my family's and that of others who live here. But it is much more complicated than that. I'm sure there are those who deeply love the woods, respect their inhabitants, and follow the law of the land and the law of order.

I know there are similarities between us, and maybe the differences aren't all that great.

Bear sign, clearcuts, and poachers. This story is about living daily with neighbors whose environmental views appear different from your own, about struggling with how to be a neighbor, how to live in community with people with whom you might not always agree. It's about how to say "No!", firmly, to actions that damage the natural world, to people you interact with across the boundary fences every day, face to face, eye to eye.

Our move to Miner's Creek didn't leave us in the middle of wilderness. We have neighbors to the east, west, and south. The open country lies to the north, the way to the Big Blackfoot. It's almost like a little rural subdivision here, a large tract of land up this forested draw that was developed twenty-five years ago, and these twenty homes, each with five to thirty acres of land, are the result.

We live between Bob and Janet to the west, whose cedar A-frame home we can barely make out through the thick woods, and the Hardwells, whose plain, brown single story house we can see clearly to the east, as the trees are not as thick in their direction. And there is a reason that we can see the Hardwell's home so clearly: Lance Hardwell works at the lumber mill at Bonner — about ten miles west of us towards Missoula — and, at first glance, it appears he has carried his mill mentality home. The Hardwells have lived here fifteen years,

and own about twenty acres of what used to be huge pines and firs. But they are mostly gone now, the slash piles and three-foot-diameter stumps the only remaining evidence. You can see the damage most clearly when you walk on the BLM road.

You first walk through thick forest with gray granite boulder draws at the turns. Small creeks run in most of these mountain folds, and huge cottonwoods and aspens along the lower creek bottoms attest to the high moisture the draws contain. Once I saw two pileated woodpeckers in this part of the thick woods, after hearing the deep rhythmic drumming on the trees that I knew was the pileated's beat and timbre. Then I saw the big red-and-black birds fly off together — a mating pair.

I walked past the bear scat, and around this first large granite draw. I came out of the cool, filtered light into the open. It was a nice change, into this full light, and I saw the possibility of some views to the west and south. But then I realized why it was so open, so light, what had produced this bright clearing. Large, old Ponderosa stumps two and three-feet high and just as wide, marked the land like gravestones, a forest cemetery. I was now walking directly above the Hardwell's house. I stopped and looked down the slope, which was almost bare all the way down to their home. Slash was scattered across this twenty-acre cut, and a few young spindly Ponderosas remained, sticking up here and there like aberrant hairs on an old bald head. The largest mass between me and their house was their satellite dish. It was this burnt, barren look that made me shudder, as if chilled on this warm fall day. I'd seen clearcuts before, and much larger ones than this. My chills came from knowing and seeing a clearcut right next to where I was now living; they came from realizing I have a neighbor — not an abstract someone I read about, but someone who moves and lives right beside me — who scars the land, creates erosion, and destroys habitat.

I walked slowly down and across the cut, back into thick forest, down to the beginnings of our property line.



I don't know why the Hardwells clearcut their land. My guess is money, a quick profit without regard for the long-term consequences. But to be fair, and not understanding why, maybe they had a good reason, had to gather some quick cash for a family emergency. But I've learned enough about forest practices to know that there are ways to cut that cause little damage to the land.

Later that day I walked over to the Hardwell's house on its bare knoll of land, and as I turned 360 degrees I saw that denuded landscape continue around their house, and then downhill past it. From their picture window they now had a "view" of the next ridge, possible because of the cut. This is a high, knife-edged ridge that rises quickly from the bottom of Miner's Creek. The steep hillside is criss-crossed with logging roads and has been cut, although not half as badly as the Hardwells, as the steep slope probably prevented logging equipment from making too serious an impact. If you're standing in front of the Hardwell's home, this ridge is practically in your face. Their look at this ridge, in other words, doesn't seem to me like much of a view.

I could hardly believe I lived right next to this kind of thinking, these kinds of acts that drastically cut the land for a quick buck and a lousy view. I realize there is, unfortunately, historical context for this kind of thinking and this kind of action. Roderick Nash, in "Wilderness and the American Mind," takes it back to the Puritans whose "...driving impulse was always to carve a garden from the wilds, to make an island of spiritual light in the surrounding darkness." The Hardwells have created no garden, but it certainly is an ersatz island of light in the surrounding cool darkness of the deep forest.

You need to know I haven't lived up Miner's Creek very long, only, at this writing, a short six months. So I really haven't earned my way here by any means. My values — like hiking the forest's game trails in my Patagonia fleece, camera in hand — might seem as strange to my neighbors as clearcutting land is to me. (I overheard this conversation at the local market between a ranch wife and her neighbor: "I saw some folks in the woods up Miner's Creek the other day and they weren't doing anything, just walking." The woman's neighbor laughed, then replied, "They were probably hiking!" and both shook their heads and laughed some more.)

My opinion could likely be as narrow as this Miner's Creek draw, my perspective as thin as sheets of fall ice. But I can't help seeing certain things that affect me and the natural world. It's hard to hold back my judgment and rage; but I know I need to, and just record what my eyes and heart reveal. One thing I seek here is how to be a good neighbor while being a good keeper of the earth; how to live, day to day, with differences and diversity without sacrificing my commitment to the land.

We have two Alaskan husky mixes, around 10 months old, who have a tendency to tear up anything plastic, yank at hanging clothes on a clothesline, and get into trash. Bad habits certainly, and ones we're trying to get rid of in these frisky, born-to-run pups. A month after we moved in, I was standing at our upstairs window looking at the Hardwell's home. I noticed a person walking quickly from the Hardwell's towards our place, and realized that it was Lance Hardwell, the mill worker. I had met Hardwell briefly only once when we first moved in; I had introduced myself, and gotten a simple grunt in response. I looked closer and saw that Hardwell wasn't just walking over, but storming over. His gait was stiff, yet quick and determined. I ran downstairs and out the door and met him at our gate. At close range now, I saw he was fuming: his face was red, his neck

puffed, and his chest was stuck out in that "I'm not taking any bullshit" pose.

"Lance, Hi, what's going on?" I asked, as calmly as I could.

"I just got done picking up trash, that's what's going on," Hardwell blurted back, close to me now. I could feel the heat of his breath on my face. "And I don't fucking like it, not one fucking bit. That couldn't be the work of your dogs, could it?"

Hardwell's teeth were grinding, his jaws clenched tightly, working hard, and he edged towards me. I slowly moved a step back.

"Yea, it may well be, Lance." I admitted, "I don't like to pick up trash from dogs, either; it's a drag, for sure. If it was one of our dogs, I'm really sorry."

I saw that Hardwell was still furious, still wanted to have a shouting match with me, maybe more. But I saw too, that the fierce anger in his eyes lessened ever so slightly.

"Well, god-damn it, it better not happen again," he replied sternly, looking down at the ground. "I don't want to spend my time picking up this crap."

"Yeah, me either," I said, "It could be other dogs you know, but, again, if it was ours, my apologies."

Hardwell lost the tightness in his face. His normal color returned, and he looked at me incredulously, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. I think he expected me to shout back, to defend myself and my dogs, and tell him to shove it.

He took a breath and shifted his weight. "I mean, I don't care if other dogs come over to our place, I don't even care if they eat our dog's food. I just don't want to fucking clean up after them." Hardwell started away, hesitated, and then turned back around.

"Where do you keep your garbage, anyway?" he asked.

"In the garage," I replied.

"Hmm, yeah, well, I guess I could do that, too. Yeah, I guess that would help."

"Yeah, it probably would," I said.

Hardwell turned and I watched him walk over the hill to his home.

About two weeks after we saw the bear scat, I drove farther up Miner's Creek in our old 4-wheel-drive brown Trooper to cut firewood. The Trooper can't carry half as much wood as a pickup, but we had gotten it to haul ourselves back up these old roads, back into the Garnet Range, and plow through the deep snows of the coming winter. Finished with cutting, I bumped my way back down the road. Getting close to home, I came to the reservoir about a 1/2 mile up Miner's Creek. It was early evening, about six o'clock. As I rounded a bend, a small black bear cub suddenly appeared on the road in front of me. It was my first bear sighting since being here. As it lumbered slowly down the middle of the road, the cub's thick black, winter-ready coat glistened in the early evening light. I quickly stopped and turned off the motor. With the cub in my periphery, I looked in all directions, cautiously watching for the mother bear I knew was close by. The cub spotted me, and, lumbering no longer, dashed up the hillside, its paws tearing the soil loose as it ran. I was amazed at how fast it got up that hill and disappeared. Now all I saw were some small rocks tumbling down the hillside, the bear's presence continuing without being seen, like a fish rippling a pond. The whole event took maybe fifteen seconds. I never saw the mother. Maybe she was uphill where the young cub had run, waiting, watching me.

Seeing the scat and the cub, so near our home, gave our



family a sense of kinship with these bears. We continued to gather wood, seal and caulk the windows, and prepare for the long winter, much like bear was doing in its own way, so close to us.

Our other immediate neighbors besides the Hardwells are Bob and Janet and their eight-year-old daughter, Jessica. Bob is a gunsmith who works out of a small, red barn shop. We occasionally hear him testing his guns, which to us sound like he's firing a small cannon, the report is so loud and thundering. I had spoken with Bob just a few times — once about some property line matters between our two pieces of land. He was easy to talk with and smiled a lot. I liked him immediately and knew he'd be a good neighbor.

Jessica usually gathers her sandy-blond hair in a ponytail, and she bounces down to the bus stop every morning led by her two dogs. Janet drives one of the school buses and cooks at the school.

A few days after I saw the bear cub, I mentioned to Bob that my electric water heater had broken and asked if he could help me fix it, not being the handyman kind of guy. I told him I wanted to pay him for his trouble. Bob just looked at the ground and said, "I'll come over in the morning." He came at 8 a.m. with tan coveralls and shiny tools, and he worked for a solid hour on the old tank. We couldn't drain the water because the drain cock was rusted, so as he replaced the elements he got completely soaked by spewing water. When he was finished, his coveralls were a dark, watered brown, and his thick glasses splattered with rust stains. Bob's hands bled from cuts on the old, stubborn metal heater.

"Well, that should last you for awhile," he said cheerfully, gathering up his tools.

"Bob, many many thanks. Let me pay you, look, here's twenty bucks. I mean, you took time out from your work and...." I handed Bob the check.

"Naw, don't worry about it. We got it done, that's what counts. You can help me when something comes up at my place. See you later."

Bob gave me a boyish, almost shy smile. I could tell he was pleased that the work was done and acknowledged. That's all he seemed to need. He turned and walked back to his red barn shop.

The next day snow fell for the third time that week. Four powder inches, and, thrilled that it was a teacher's work day with no school, Evan and Campbell got their sleds and scooted down some short hills right behind our house. A friendly snowball fight with neighbor kids lasted an hour, and then they all took off down the road to "the big hill." As much as I wanted to, I didn't go with them, but plowed into my work with The Wolf Education and Research Center. It's what some call "Lone Eagle" work; computers, e-mail, and faxes keep me in touch with our main office in Boise, Idaho as I write grant proposals for this non-profit environmental group in my home office upstairs.

After a couple of hours, I found an excuse to take a break, and shuffled out the road to our mailbox. My feet moved easily through the light, airy snow. I put the letters in the box, raised the flag on the side, and then saw a group of people circled around a bonfire below the big sledding hill. Two older cars were parked nearby. Behind the bonfire group were a half dozen children, sledding down the open hillside, throwing snow balls, building snow forts, and sweeping the white powder with their outstretched arms in perfect snow angels. I walked across the road, and as I got closer I saw that Beth was one of the adults by

the fire. I recognized the blaze-orange ribbon banded around her brimmed hat (it was hunting season). Our neighbor, Janet, was there along with two men and a woman that I didn't recognize. All except Beth stared at me as I approached, beer cans in hand.

"Hi, I'm Tom," I introduced myself to the group, and nodded to Janet, who motioned to me in greeting with a Ball jar full of some clear liquid. Beth told me later Janet's drink was vodka chased with melted snow.

"Hey, I'm Jake," said one, with a broad smile revealing stained, wide-spread teeth.

"Johnny," said the other man, who wore an old blaze-orange vest, rumpled blaze-orange hat, and thick glasses.

"Hi, I'm Theresa," the woman joined in.

"You want a beer?" Jake said and motioned to the 12-pack of Schmidts lying banked in the snow. Empty cans lay crunched and charred in the fire.

"No, thanks," I replied. "I work at home and I'm still at it; I just needed to take a break for a few minutes. But thanks," I added again, wanting to reassure them, reassure myself, that I do drink beer, that I want to share this friendly time around the fire with them.

"What kind of work do you do?" asked Johnny.

Beth turned and glanced at me, glanced at Johnny, a little anxious as to how this group was going to react to my work with wolves.

"I work with an education group about wolves and other endangered species," I began, moving closer to Johnny so he could hear me over the crackle of the bonfire and the shouts of the kids' snowplay.

"Wolves," Johnny quickly replied. "Hey, I used to own a wolf-hybrid. Best damn dog I ever had. Dog died trying to mount another dog on the ice; slipped and split his hips. Damn shame."

Johnny took a swig of beer, looked at the other two, and shook his head.

"I got this old hound now," Johnny said, pointing to a stumpy, alert dog sitting next to him, a blue bandanna tied around its neck. "He's not as pretty as that hybrid, but he's damn smart. Loyal, too." The dog looked up at him, almost proudly, as if knowing it was being spoken of.

Johnny leaned over the fire, spat, and tossed his empty beer can in the flames.

"Jake here is kind of a scientist, too; he's a microbiologist," Johnny said, motioning to the man with the blaze-orange vest and thick glasses.

"He's out of work now, but he knows all about that science stuff," Johnny continued, in a friendly, bragging kind of way.

Jake grunted an acknowledgment, but said nothing. He finished his beer and tossed the empty can in the fire.

A "V" of Canada geese honked its way above us, heading south. We're all silenced for a moment. We looked up, and the "V" wavered in the sky, as if written by an old shaky hand. The fire embers popped.

Jake spoke for the first time since I'd arrived.

"You know the best way to kill a goose way up there? You gotta aim and shoot at the head one, and then by the time your shot gets there, if you're lucky, you'll get the one that's flying in the back."

Everyone but Beth and I nod, then Janet interrupted.

"Hey Tom, I just remembered. There's an elk feed down at The Last Hole Bar tomorrow, a benefit for some folks who lost their home in a fire. They'll put an elk on the spit, lots of food and beer and all. Thought you and Beth might want to



come."

"Yeah, thanks Janet," I replied, appreciating her attempt to include us in this local gathering at the bar. "Sounds pretty good. So, we might see you all tomorrow evening."

"Well, it actually starts at the bar in the afternoon, not at night, probably around three or so," Janet answered, and then added with a knowing smile, "It's still safe then; you know, when you can bring the kids."

As I walked back to the house, I was aware of a strange combination of feelings. I was taken by the warmth of these folks gathered by the bonfire, watching their kids sled, and having a few beers on a Friday afternoon. There was something very simple and right about that, a totally unpretentious gathering, a simple act of community. I couldn't imagine it happening in a Missoula neighborhood, or any other city neighborhood in quite that same way. The land, this rural setting, gave us the freedom to act as neighbors without thinking about it too much. And I love that, I love those simple acts of coming together.

But as much as I had enjoyed it, my head was whirling with the wild mix of what I was experiencing at Miner's Creek. Along with clearcuts like Hardwell's, the past few weeks I witnessed other atrocities: huge full-bodied elk carcasses, stiff with death, pushed out of a pickup and rolled out of sight down a nearby hill, left to rot after their heads and antlers had been cut off; gut-piles from kills that you knew took place much higher in the mountains, tossed off the side of Miner's Creek road, near homes; (making the bear and lion come down closer to homes, creating potential trouble); and huge spotlights fixed on the side of pickups headed for the mountains near dusk, the possibility of deer and elk stilled by the (illegal) light, easy targets from the cab.

The people around Miner's Creek are my neighbors, most of whom are friendly, wonderful folks, but I can feel our newcomer values of land preservation coming at right angles to theirs. "We've been in a conquest mythology," writer William Kittredge says of the Western state of mind, "And our future needs to be one of taking care of things." How do I talk about taking care of things in a way that withholds condemnation, withholds personal judgment? How am I to be a good neighbor, a good member of this small, tight community, without betraying my beliefs?

I sat down at my desk, and through the large picture window watched the snow drape a tall Ponderosa. The pine's one trunk splits into two arms halfway up; the arms cross in graceful curves, as if hugging each other.

A month after we saw the bear scat — two weeks after I saw the cub—I heard a commotion on the road just outside our house. It was a Thursday afternoon, in the middle of hunting season. I ran to our window and saw Bob standing by his red, flatbed pickup, with a couple of other men whom I didn't recognize.

They were hoisting bottles of beer, as if in a toast, laughing, shouting, and talking loudly. At first I just thought they were celebrating the afternoon, the day before Friday, an early weekend. But then I looked closer. In the back of Bob's truck I saw the cause for their celebration: a huge black bear lay crumpled, stilled, its round head jutting out almost over the edge of the flatbed, its rich, soft brown coat shimmering in the long afternoon light. There was no blood. I immediately thought, "Was this 'our' black bear, the bear who's scat we had seen and visited just a month ago? Was it even possibly the mother of the cub I had seen?" I stood silent, motionless on our

upper deck, witnessing the party below. The beer bottles clinked, the laughter continued. For the next two days I saw Bob drive the flatbed back and forth on our road, the bear skin still displayed in the back, head flopping around the curves.

The entire week we all dragged around our house and land in mourning. We wondered if Bob and his family ate any of the bear meat. That would help us accept the killing in some ways, knowing that at least the meat was being used. Deer and elk kills we knew fed families, but we didn't understand why someone would shoot an animal not usually killed for its meat. I knew I had to talk with Bob, about why he had killed the bear.

I got my chance when I needed a machine part repaired. Because Bob is a gunsmith, I thought he would have the tools to help me fix this part, and it was my excuse to ask him questions about the bear. I knocked on the door to his red barn shop and heard Bob answer brightly, "Come in."

"Hi Tom, what can I do for you?" Bob asked as he walked down the shop steps, smiling.

"I've got this sanding machine part that needs a little welding, and I thought you'd have a welder. Do you mind?" I asked.

"No, not at all. Let me take a look at it."

Bob took the part, peered over his thick, black-rimmed glasses that he pushed up with his pointer finger, and fired up his welder. I looked around the shop. Bob's tools hung neatly on the walls, the floor was swept. Snap-On Tools calendars were nailed on two walls, with women spilling out of their short skin-tight tops, displaying more than tools.

"Here it is, good as new," Bob said to me, startling me from my shop musings.

"Thanks, Bob. Yeah, that looks great. Hey, Jessica told me that you got a black bear this season; so, um, how did it happen?"

"Oh the bear, yeah, well, I was out elk hunting not too far from here, in fact just a little ways behind my house, back off an old logging road. I was following these elk for quite awhile. I had a few in particular that I was after and was really concentrating on those. I'd get close, they'd move, I'd get close again, they'd move again. I just kept after them. But then I see this bear and I just kept my eye on it for awhile, 'cause I really wasn't out to shoot a bear. I wanted to see if it had cubs, to see if it was a female, because I wouldn't have taken it then, but I didn't see any cubs. It was a big boar for sure. But all of a sudden the bear was just thirty yards away from me."

"So, did it charge, did you feel kind of threatened?" I asked hopefully, figuring this was the excuse I needed to hear.

"No, in fact, it was scared and started running away. So I just blammed it. It fell with two shots."

A few days later Evan told me he heard from Jessica that they were eating the bear meat. This helped ease my sadness, for I wanted that bear's death to have some kind of purpose. Evan, Campbell and I decided to walk up the road and see the bear scat one more time. It was starting to decompose, the large cylinders not having the fresh shimmering look they had a month ago. But we were still amazed at its size, and we talked again about the bear who once walked here, in this very place we were standing. Evan poked the scat with a stick, examining the faded purple elderberries, but still bright red mountain ash berries. This is when Evan told me that Bob was eating the meat.

"You know, Dad, Jessica said something else too, besides about them eating the meat."

"What's that Ev?"



"Jessica said that now they can even up their walls."  
 "Even up their walls? What's that supposed to mean?"

I asked.

"Well, Jessica said that Bob got a bear last year too, and hung the bear skin. Now he can hang this skin on the other wall and even the walls out."

In *Who Owns the West?*, William Kittredge writes "...we have to talk things out, searching for accord, however difficult and long-winded the undertaking." The old West style of no compromises (shoot-outs, closed minds, closed hearts) is not going to work for us anymore.

I've worked on wolf recovery and researched attitudes towards wolves, studies which reveal in some people, like coarse wood under a thin veneer, a deep hatred for this animal. I have witnessed this in hotbeds of anti-wolf sentiment, like Cody, Wyoming. Signs were carried during anti-wolf protests which read: "The wolf is the next Saddam Hussein," and testimony at reintroduction hearings threatened: "The next federal official who talks wolf recovery will be met by the barrel of my gun."

I listened hard when I spoke with these wolf opponents, and won even their trust. But I could, and did, walk away from them and their sentiments. I could retreat to the safety of my home, my friends, my progressive town of Missoula.

What is so different here in this rural community compared to Missoula, just twenty miles away? In the Missoula city neighborhood we moved from, the ethics of care for the natural world were shrouded by distance, insulated like the thick wrapping over copper wire keeping the power of the electrical current safe. Up Miner's Creek the insulation has been stripped off, the land and wildlife are all around you, close at hand, with full contact available. The wire is bare, and the current of decision is full of the power of consequence.

But do I have to agree one hundred percent with someone to be their ally, to be their friend, their neighbor? Do I always have to live amongst my own, always confirming and verifying my values with those who think like me? Certainly I don't want us all to be the same, nor am I trying to pretend that we are. As Kathleen Norris writes in *Dakota, A Spiritual Geography*, I would "... end up with conformity at the expense of community." It is community that I desire, and a community of diversity, not destructiveness.

It is indeed much easier to rant and rave across the page here than across the fence, with the person who might have committed some of these acts. The written word allows discretions to be pummeled from afar, with no risk of direct confrontation. But some sort of real dialogue is necessary with your neighbors whom you see every day at the school or market. Not necessarily to agree, but to engage.

Months later my anguish for the bear's death has lessened, but I still struggle with my sense of community and environmental ethics. Evan senses this and asks one evening just before sleep, "Dad, what are you writing about anyway, how to live with people that are different from you?"

"Yeah, that's it. Ev. Different culturally, philosophically."

Evan pauses and then says, "But you know, the people up here aren't all that different. They've got hearts and souls, ...and a sense of judgment. Bob's really a nice guy."

"You're right, Ev, you're right." I look at Evan and laugh softly to myself.

He takes my hand and falls asleep.

The forest echoes my dreams of community.

When I am cutting firewood, sweat pours off my forehead, my heart pounds with the exertion of moving a chain saw through wood, of rolling large logs downhill to the truck. The

chain saw drowns out all other sound around as I work through a thick piece of Doug fir. I am breathing hard. The saw rips through the last inches of the log and I turn it off. I hear my heartbeat now, loud, deep, and full. It throbs strongly against my chest, almost through my chest it seems.

And then, listening more closely, I hear what seems to be a larger and even louder heartbeat; I realize that the sound is like the forest's heartbeat. It seems I hear a pounding of the trees, of the air almost, the pulsing of the forest and all it contains: granite rock, spring water, bear scat, my neighbors. This forested draw of Miner's Creek is pounding, throbbing, my heart is whapping at my chest, and it is two deep bass beats. Separate, different, of their own accord.

And then it changes.

I can't tell which pounding is my heart and which is the forest's. It is as if the forest's and my heart merge as one. The two beats—one of hope and one of blood—blend and become a single strong pulse.



Photo: Kelley Segars



Guy Hand

## Reunion

Above New Orleans rain begins to fall. It drops from thunderheads into this steaming Louisiana afternoon. It gathers moisture—the air, all but liquefied anyway, was waiting for an excuse—and momentum. It collects the sky into a torrent and soon hits the streets of the French Quarter with a weight heavy as truth.

In other neighborhoods, the Garden District say, where the antebellum mansions have room to breathe, handsome lawns soak up downpours before they're noticed. But here—where buildings stand shoulder to shoulder and the landscape sinks under an unbroken crust of bars, barkers, and those ubiquitous wrought-iron balconies; where rain travels a hard, impervious path down Bourbon, Chartres, and Royal, pushing along old beignets, beer cans, condoms, guitar picks and bits of last night's shrimp *etouffée*; where lurid smiles are common as crawdaddies—rain is making plans.

Rain crashes down in a thunderous rush and I back into a doorway as far as I can. There's no other place to hide if you're short on cash or the shops are closed. What you do is wait.

Water swirls around me, rumbles under my feet, rushes the streets in search of other rains. Here too are mountain rains, prairie rains, steel-town rains, rains that once fell on Helena, Montana; Jamestown, New York; and a slice of Canada. Rain from the eastern Rockies all the way to western Appalachia—close to half the rain that falls on the United States—finds the Mississippi, joins it, and then pushes against levees only blocks from here. Water has chosen Louisiana for a monumental gathering of the clan. Individual droplets make this journey from sea to sky to cloud to rain to river to sea every two million years, but this time there's a difference—a city stands where before there was nothing at all but delta.

It is no wonder New Orleans is a walled city, a fortress surrounded by a ring levee designed to keep out not only this reunion of water, but all the more fluid parts of Louisiana as well—the canals and bayous and lakes. St. Bernard Parish, in the suburbs, contains only two percent solid ground. Of course, a closed circle designed to keep water away also holds it in. Fourteen pumping stations kick on to bail the city out during downpours. When the rain comes faster than the pumps can pump, cars stall, pets drown and coffins occasionally rise from their crypts, floating off like cadaverous barges. Some call it bad *juju*. Others call it inevitable.

Water invented Louisiana: a wide, flat, fertile delta built by a mighty river delivering the sediments of 31 states to the Gulf of Mexico. Only water can sustain it. If the Frenchmen who built New Orleans in 1718 had listened to the water rushing around them they might have learned something about the limits of human power. If they had listened to the roar of the floods that washed away their first efforts at city building, to the pounding rain that fell at 57 and some inches a year, to the sediment rilling across vast flood plains, to the screaming

hurricane winds that sweep unimpeded over these flats, they might have thought again about city building in bayou country.

In 1735, eight years after the governor declared the city's levee system complete at three feet high, the young settlement flooded. In 1785 it flooded. In the 1850's the levees were raised to six feet. The city flooded in 1862, 1866, and 1867. Water is rising today.

Rain licks at my shoes. I push into my doorway until the doorknob pushes back. This end of the Quarter is hushed, holding its breath, all peeling paint, faded curtains and locked gates. This end is where tourism fades away and the real thing seeps in, where laundromats replace antique shops, and K-Paul's, Antoine's, and Galatoire's give way to the roux and onion scent of homecooking. This end is where vacationers first pull out their maps and begin nervously retracing their steps back toward the safe sounds of hotel jazz. Those without maps often find themselves on the wrong side of Rampart Street, just three blocks away. It's a different city there, with poverty and anger and a borderline some don't see. During Mardi Gras one tourist a night, on average, crosses Rampart Street and does not cross back. The police find the robbed and murdered bodies in golden morning light, party hats often still in place. Such details don't find their way into the Chamber of Commerce brochures, but like the above-ground cemeteries, or the shop windows cluttered with burnt offerings and crystal balls, they add to a mystique already thick and dark as gumbo.

Dramas are not only played out in the back streets. The Army Corps of Engineers practices a kind of witchcraft as well, using *gris-gris* bags not blessed with fire, water, earth and air as the traditional amulets are; but with technology, concrete, hubris, and steel. The Corps doesn't burn offerings; it makes blueprints. It chants hymns of domination. It carves desires into the delta.

The Army Corps of Engineers took over where the French left off, but wasn't listening to the water either. Mark Twain said of the Corps, "four years at West Point, and plenty of books and schooling, will learn a man a good deal, I reckon, but it won't learn him the river....[he] might as well bully the comets in their courses and undertake to make them behave as try to bully the Mississippi into right and reasonable conduct." After the Corps channelized and leveed most of Louisiana, Twain was proved right. Although the Mississippi River has arguably the longest continuous levee system in the world—1600 miles of levee below Cape Girardeau, Missouri—and stands taller, longer, and wider than the Great Wall of China, the river continues, like a comet, to find its own course. The river flooded in 1882 and the Corps raised the levees to 12 feet. The river flooded in 1884, 1890, 1891, 1897, 1898, 1903, 1912, 1913, 1922, and 1927. The Corps raised the levees, in places, to 30 feet. As if appreciative of irony, certain floods forced the Corps to dynamite some of their own rural levees to relieve pressure on those surrounding New Orleans.

As levees rise so do rivers, like wounds infected with mud and misunderstanding. Rivers, tributaries, and canals constrained by levees now rise all over Louisiana, all over the Mississippi Basin. They rise with every flood and flush of



sediment and accompanying plea to save a farm or a town or a dream. Where once three feet was enough, thirty will no longer suffice. It's not difficult to imagine the levees rising until the Mississippi laps at the gates of heaven.

Before the rain I wandered Jackson Square, as most tourists do, walking past St. Louis Cathedral, the portrait-while-you-wait artists, the palm readers and that dobro player with lightning fingers and tombstone eyes. I noticed the hill at the south end of the Square and, walking up it, found myself suddenly eye to eye with the Mississippi. I was stunned. It curved in a wide arc mere inches from levee top—and 15 feet above street level. For those grown accustomed to living behind a Maginot Line of Bermuda grass and dirt the sight must seem routine. But for me it was disorienting, disconcerting: all that water, all that power, all that potential—*hovering*—above the stone streets of the Square. It felt like black magic, this levitating of the third longest river on earth, the levee too frail, too earthbound to sustain such towering witchery. I wondered if anyone else felt the river pushing.

I rest my head against the door, cool droplets slide along my neck, down my spine, to the small of my back. I shiver. So quickly heat has been sucked from the air. In the middle distance there is nothing but a blur of rain. It falls as fat and juicy as Creole tomatoes. My eyes wander. I look across the narrow street and see, in a doorway directly opposite, a greasy overcoat draped among garbage cans. I think nothing of it until two dark eyes flash and from behind the coat's upturned collar a man's face emerges. I begin to see within the shadows, a human form: the curve of a dirt-streaked arm emerging through ill-fitted sleeves to broken fingernails, legs clothed in slacks so filthy I can't think of a name for the color, and ancient toes poking through older sandals. I glance at this apparition and he glances back. I feel him scan my Gore-tex raincoat and Timberland shoes, but see no anger or even envy in his eyes. His eyes are old and what I see in them is recognition.

The clouds let loose a flood and he shrinks into his doorway. I do the same. Water pools on the balcony above his head, then cascades in thick ribbons that splash at his feet. He breaks into a toothless grin and shrugs his shoulders. So do I. When thunder crashes too close, we jerk in unison and cock our heads toward the flash. We look at each other with the wide, anxious eyes of children. I feel an urge to call out to him, but stop the sound deep in my throat. I hold it there, until it disappears.

I listen instead to the sounds rain can make. I try to separate them. There's the high metallic click of drops hitting garbage can lids, the milky plop as they fall into the pool that creeps toward my feet, the low rumble as water pulses beneath the streets like blood through veins. They mix with the pulse of my heart. I imagine myself as water animated; not separate, not divided by skin or belief from this rush of water. I close my eyes and lick cool drops, my blood mingling with water, flowing for

the same reasons that rains fall and rivers run.

As surely as the delta, we humans were invented by water, cloaked in skin, pushed from the sea, given arms and legs, and perhaps a responsibility to do right by kin—to rivers and rain and all the rest. I see New Orleans as a testament to that kinship forgotten, all carved and contained and cut away from truth; I look at the man huddled a few arm lengths away and see it again.

How long ago did we forget our liquid parentage? At what point did we start thinking of ourselves as inhabiting some other landscape, an inner one, governed by the illusion of a uniquely human hydrology? Exactly when did we start thinking more of ourselves and less of kin, paying scant attention to where water asked to go and all to where *we* wanted to go, building homes and levees and cities and philosophies in all the wrong places, dividing water from itself, ourselves from the world, and finally, ourselves from each other? And why? It's the rain asking questions now: sluicing, undercutting, pushing

aside. I don't have the answers. I hear levees groan. I open my eyes.

A hard shaft of light breaks through low on the horizon, turning the street silver. I see my rain-bound partner better now; and the details of a life lived on the other side of Rampart Street: I see the blue shirt and the scar on his left cheek. I see the plastic bag filled with scraps of cloth. I see the wedding ring. He glances my way, his lips forming a word, and just then the rain stops like a door slammed shut. He looks up at the chimney swifts that have appeared above the roofs and watches them swoop and dive. He smiles. They fill the sky like rain transformed.

Sun knives in along the hovering river and washes away shadows. Drops of rain catch light and fall from hundreds of balconies like shimmering curtains, and for the briefest moment the French Quarter gleams with the garish brilliance of a Confederate theme park. I turn my back on Rampart Street and walk toward that safe sound of hotel jazz. It grows louder. Soon, I won't hear the faintest whisper of rain making plans.

---

*This end is where  
vacationers first pull out their  
maps and begin nervously retracing  
their steps back toward the safe  
sounds of hotel jazz.*

---



James Taylor III

## Three Points of Wind

The wind blows and maybe it blows all the way to Nebraska. For some strange reason the Nebraskan panhandle has become important to me. More than a state of mind to explore or hide out in, but a landmark of history that has been blown around and still remains intact. A region where the stories will not be obstructed. Things grow and then blow out. Missing fingers and toes, all the easy extremities a man could live without. And while some men look clean and familiar, some just look for something to hold onto. A steering wheel, a snow fence or wind break: anything that enables the rigid to stand straighter.

I have decided to find a way to live with wind. I will tell my stories of part-time money and full-forced love; conjuring up the facts that look sharper in the mind if not so distinguishable to the eye. Between the weight and loss of an unbroken horizon I will stand among the short grass ghosts and breathe along dryland wheat.

Driving north on a county dirt road I drove by a faded sign, painted black and white and nailed low on a fence post. "3 States Corner" it read with an arrow pointing east. I

went another quarter mile before it registered in my mind just exactly what 3 States Corner could be. I backed up hastily and made the turn down ranch ruts between barbwire and power poles. Nine tenths of a mile past a windmill, water tank and a cattle chute, the road

circles around a monument three feet tall. Built of local stone and mortar by Oliver N. Chaffee on August 17, 1869, it marks the exact physical location where Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska converge. This is where Nebraska's elevation is higher than Colorado's and from here Wyoming looks long and lean. A range where contemplation is not a luxury of the idle but a daily point of fact.

I have since stood there weary and wondering what to keep that will allow that strict bond of determination which clings to my gut-hard, single-shot, hair-brained stubborn sense of husbandry consummate. I've listened to my wife, hollered at my kids and watched for the red tail's elegant lift-off just to identify the instincts that can keep me grounded to a prairie so wind blown. It's a feeling that may never be articulated, a stance that may never be broached, a calling not many can hear.

I'm beginning to understand the solitary traveler because I have grown into a plainsman. Not like the old fur trappers or buckskinned trail guides, not a farmer or rancher who has settled in, but an American Dreamer poised on the unfamiliar bluff, ready to make my stand with minimal impact and long-term subsistence.

When I pick a point and proceed with great accuracy, I find that the underlying current is how the balance of land,

sea and sky equals the dynamics of flesh, bone and blood. If I want to define spirit, it is just the pull that directs one home. If I bend the story, trade an image or linger on the punch of three hard consonants, it is not to set up a surprise ending, but to discover the natural bridge between the swirl of tongue and a sharp turning of the mind.

Many years ago I took a western states road map and straight-edge and connected the outposts with highlighter and madness. The lines formed an almost perfect equilateral triangle cocked just a hair to the northeast. Start at the northernmost point, the Pine Ridge in Nebraska, then go south to the Pawnee Buttes and Grasslands in Colorado. Head due west to the Medicine Bows and Bull Mountain at the north central Colorado and Wyoming border, and return to the Ridge across southeastern Wyoming. It is a self-imposed exile based upon the breadth of my bio-region, width of my watersheds, depth of my gas tank.

I have not covered all this ground and probably never will. It is expansive, open, and closed-minded. It crosses many logical and arbitrary designations. I have all the time there is—geologic and metaphysical—and still the dirt in my life is hard to comprehend. To pick which road cut, gully or arroyo, which fenceline to follow or disregard, on which wagon rutted,

washboarded, bone rattling, gravel pitted, rock

throwing, ice crusted, sun baked

and clay backed one-laner do I

begin sifting through the layers

to find out why I chose to

be here. How similar all these

roads first appear: deceptively

straightforward. Yet there are

islands inside these waves of grain

that I ignore. They hold no earthly

interest to me. Thousands of people I will never cross, listen to, or help out during an icy emergency. Through no fault of their own they stand there dull and uninformed in my imagination, curiously bloodless.

If I were to X the spot where my tipi stands hidden from tourists and emigrants, anxious hunters and field-tested poets, could I convince myself that it could be used but not disturbed? The search for purer oxygen has led me to these high plains and this tipi on the edge of the interface has become my symbol of western independence. The provincial order of things will not allow me to trespass, nor will it let me admit a stranger who does not announce his intentions.

Now that I am a 40-acre anarchist and have my own chunk of ground, I need a plot to dream about. The tipi has been pitched in Colorado. The resident hunting licenses have been issued by the Colorado Division of Wildlife. The closest settlement is in Wyoming and the panhandle of Nebraska looms as exotic as Alaska.

A field so close I can smell it fermenting and yet far enough away that the language is recognizable, but the mythology is foreign. A place not too far from the grain elevators where the women never outgrow their allergies. To delve into the genetic makeup of sunflowers and petrified driftwood one

---

*A field so close I can smell  
it fermenting and yet far enough away  
that the language is recognizable, but the  
mythology is foreign.*

---



must understand how loneliness grows quietly at first and then bursts into a stark, dry pain. And still, there are no secrets here other than the ordinary questions and mysteries, the stuff women and children haggle over and men fantasize about. When the women complain to themselves about hot flashes and tick fever, the men laugh. The men could live without knowing if it's giardia or sour mash that leaves them heaving. They stagger in and out of work or church and be immune to the wind or whatever might knock them down...

I believe in wind and the non-fictive nature of blue babies and blue skies. I have learned the tracks of the snowshoe hare in winter, and have promised myself to take the time to identify its prints across water and discern its scent upon pine.

The fact that I have brought children into this world, facing east on snowy afternoons confuses me less than the nature of wind shear and the declination of magnetic north. The compacts I have held with the southern worlds and the jack-rabbit clan bear witness to a genus that has locus and lusty

language.

If I have one firm notion about the symbiotic twist of things, it is that children need animals, musical instruments, pencils, hammers and maps, and they need them early on and often. I do not need to pretend that I have advanced proficiencies in any of these areas, I just have to demonstrate the proper care and handling of the tools we choose to celebrate with.

The wind blows and maybe it blows all the way to Nebraska. The winds will change, or generate all the energetic interest and wild-ass ideas that one family man has allowed himself to be consumed with. I could stand right here and describe the wind and together we still might not be able to see it. My backward sense of direction tells me that all is not lost, and instead of putting my back to the wall, I should lift my nose unto the wind. I cannot rearrange the Ridge, the Buttes, the Bows and the Bull, nor can I find one answer that can cross all boundaries, but when you believe in wind, you believe in a breath that can change direction.



Photo: Jeff Edmonds



Cara Blessley

## Revisiting the Forest

The Subarctic falls on the rim of the treeline. From this point on, trees are merely rumor drifting from the south. The wind carries one seed dropped from fertile cones for hundreds of miles. It travels north across ice and tundra, zig-zags from east to west. When the ice has melted the seed may settle, or blow on to the barrenlands of High Arctic islands. Eventually, due to a rock or snag, the seed gets hung up. Its life as a tree begins.

In Fredericksburg, Virginia, I lived with the forest at my back. Our house was situated in a rural area outside town. Not a suburb, not the country a large acreage to the north separated us from our nearest neighbors. My swing-set was the only barrier between our house and the trees beyond.

One afternoon I went walking in the forest and found a fallen log, one quarter cut out to make a bench. It was here I met my first wild friends. Out from behind firs came rabbits and squirrels.

Deer followed and I sat on the log listening to their stories, telling them mine. Not long into our stories, I heard voices from the meadow calling my name. I said good-bye to the animals and turned toward home. I was three years old.

The voices turned out to be a local rescue effort organized on my behalf. I had been gone for hours and no matter how I contested, no one would believe I was not lost in the first place. And they were definitely not interested in my stories of the animal gathering.

Not long ago, my mom and I spoke of that incident. Rays moving through the treetops, shifting in the wind. How my legs dangled off the log bench as I listened. The look of the forest floor, the pine needles and soggy moss. The forest opens up, exposes its secrets. I listen for the animals, the stories of their lives there.

It is the fifth day of our trip, the second day out on the tundra. The last time I saw this place was a year ago, November. November—ice, wind, moon. If I didn't know better, I'd have guessed I was on the moon. That was my first time in the Far North. All that was solid and white then has turned fluid, moves with waves of heat and cold, the air liquid and flowing.

Last night over dinner we decided to carry on to Knight's Hill instead of staying another night at the cabin. This morning in the dim light that filtered through filthy windows, I awoke to the reality of my surroundings. The cabin serves as a trapper's shack in winter and a refuge during hunting season in the spring and fall. It is constructed out of corrugated metal, with odds and ends of scrap wood pieced together to make frames for the doors and windows. Four single cots with stained, sagging mattresses sulk into the corners, competing with dusty spider webs that look heavy with food for a month.

Charlie, our guide, is cooking breakfast. Coffee is gurgling in a percolating pot. No mosquitoes managed to get in during the night, but the ones that stayed bedded down with all of us. We itch and take turns putting full-strength deet on our clothing and caps. Over fried eggs we talk about our plans for the day.

TM wants to explore the wooded area to the west. From the cabin I can see the trees. Looking west, the tundra

becomes a landscape of connect-the-dots proportions. One by one, trees begin to thicken, merging tundra into forest. Northernmost boreal forests are referred to as *taiga*. Spruce gather and join forces, boughs come together to protect each other from the wind. The wind blows. In winter, sharp pieces of ice sand away the exposed branches on the windward side of trees. Snow gathers at the base where branches die, where the wind finds its way in.

Flagged trees are indicative of a Subarctic landscape. They are the sentinels of the land, their presence a contrast to the breadth of tundra that makes up most of the Churchill region. In the wake of taiga, tundra begins. Tundra, tundra, for as far as they eye can see. The trees give me faith again in what I perceive, while the tundra plays tricks, pushing the horizon until it is but a crack laid down against Hudson Bay.

The climate at latitude fifty-eight degrees marks the difference between true Arctic and the Subarctic. Churchill is boundary-habitat: cold air off the bay contributes to true Arctic conditions, while warm southerly winds temper summer freezes, permitting the survival of Subarctic flora. The boundary-land between Arctic and Subarctic fosters a sense of magic. In this transitional zone special things happen: *muskeg*, soggy earth, lies bog-like between trees. Sphagnum mosses carpet the taiga floor, co-existing with the shallow root systems of black spruce.

Breeding birds are out there somewhere. I've heard that from the air the tundra looks littered with wadded-up pieces of paper, miles and miles of snow geese, pairs set up within twenty feet of each other. The birds here comprise the largest nesting colony of lesser snow geese in North America. We've come this far to photograph the spectacle. I'll shoot video, TM will shoot stills and 16mm film footage.

Charlie carries a shotgun strapped across his back with a shred of plastic rope. He leaves it there while he rides and doesn't take it off until he's settled in for the night. TM rarely carries weapons into the field—most of the time danger is not so immediate that we'd need one. Charlie knows this land; he's spent years guiding polar bear trips in the fall. There's something in his face that looks native, maybe Cr e, a quiet knowledge in his way of looking out to the horizon. He says we won't find the geese until we're closer to the bay.

With the gear loaded we maneuver wide U-turns between the cabin and the lake and follow each other parade-style up the sloping tundra. In the distance I see the land rise, the angle that marks where the trees begin. The place beyond becomes a blur of inconsistent height and depth—the trees seem tall, the distance impossible to discern though it can't be more than five miles away.

White spruce, black spruce share the realm of the taiga. These two species of coniferous trees stand their ground, year after year. The black spruce is the tougher of the two, with its ability to keep its balance and nurture its life in the thin active layer of soil that separates the permafrost table and the surface of the tundra. It can survive in the peat bogs that stretch over the land. White spruce requires well-drained soil and is present at this latitude mainly on raised surfaces inland from Hudson Bay.

Conglomerate creates a road that leads into the heart of the taiga. These small stones and pebbles, remnants of glacial deposits, give the appearance of man-made routes laid out over the land, a gravel road leading to nowhere. From the road





Photo: Jeff Edmonds

the forest seems farther and farther away. Rocks spit up from the motor bikes tires; we alternate racing ahead of one another, burning off steam with speed. Trees begin to line the road on both sides like a corridor ushering us in deeper.

The snow is about gone now, only broken patches between trees remain. This area is typical breeding habitat for the willow ptarmigan: dwarf shrubs, scattered trees, a grassy slope on the edge of the treeline. Low-growing dense vegetation provides protection from arctic foxes and hunters, enemies of the ptarmigan.

At a break in the trees TM spots rustling in the bushes. We double-back and stop fifty yards from a covey of ptarmigan. They are piebald against the muted tones of brown sedges. One lone male scoots around the bush, gurgling and pulsing his chestnut-colored head to the sound of his own voice. Females find their own cover. They seem eager to escape both situations.

We creep around the opposite side of the bush, playing a sort of hide-and-seek with the birds. TM slowly begins to extend the tripod legs, I am directed back to the bikes to get the video. I don't like to shoot over his shoulder, so I walk ten paces to where I guess the ptarmigan are heading. The females drift apart then manage to band back together again under a bush on the downside of the slope. They all look truly nervous.

I pan the movements of the male ptarmigan, cut to the females, close-up of their faces, wide-shot of the tundra. They don't do much except cluck low, deep vocalizations. I can't help but feel like we've crashed their party. Male willow ptarmigan have blood-red "eyebrows" that look like turkey wattles stuck above their eyes. More precisely, they are called supra-ocular combs. The females have no markings of this sort; their more mellow plumage is finely barred, inconspicuous.

I don't have to wonder just what this painted male

has in store for the females. Ninety-percent of all bird species are monogamous—ptarmigan, however, do not fall into this statistic. The majority are monogamous, but there is a deviation in this figure as five to ten percent fall into the polygynous category-- one male mates with more than one female. There's no way of knowing if this male belongs to that group, but it certainly appears that way.

Willow ptarmigan turn invisible in the winter. Snowballs with feet. Coconut-covered pastries with sunflower seed beaks, hiding under willows. In the same family as grouse, willow ptarmigan are gregarious, and seem ridden by a near-constant anxiety. Look at their life. They cluck and peck along the ground, snip willow shoots all winter and hope not to be found out by the occasional arctic fox. Their existence seems unsettled, their lives in steady flux.

Ptarmigan *change*—it is essential to their survival. They come to the forest to move into breeding plumage, to pursue their clandestine love among the dwarf shrubs and moss beds. TM has finished photographing. The birds move and find their way once again into the tangle of branches that birthed them to our eyes. Back on my bike, the trees look still, vacant. Beneath their boughs, there's life.

The wind is picking up again, which is timely as the mosquitoes have found us. We look like angels with halos on: black, buzzing clouds linger around our heads. On foot, Charlie and TM scout the area for activity. Beneath my feet, I have found the Garden of Eden in miniature. I set up the video camera with a macro lens and settle onto my knees. Intricate flowers tremble against the wind. One spindly branch struggles alone next to the flowers. They seem to have it easier than this twig poking above the ground. Its length lends to its liability—whereas the flowers are small and appear engraved on the tun-



dra, this branch is an appendage of the earth, separate but attached in different places to all that surrounds it. I can see it wants to grow up, away from the earth but all it shows is a snaking across the tundra, stretching its six inches against the ground for protection from the wind. Its life depends on the interconnectedness of tundra: flower relying on moss, seed relying on wind. Its surroundings anchor its future.

Like the gentle curl of a wave, the treeline sweeps down at an angle—from high in the northwest corner of Alaska down to the lower southeast portion of Canada's Northwest Territories. Its limits are not distinct. It moves carved by the wind and short days of weak light, heaves its torso and falls back in places. On a map, the treeline is marked as a definite boundary. This line on the map is intended to intimate one thing: the northernmost point where tree growth comes to a gradual halt.

I look out across the tundra and see that this one stubborn branch won't make a significant difference in extending the treeline. But should it gain enough energy to come to seed and reproduce, producing another, and yet another, then the Arctic would be carpeted with trees, a myth like the jungles of our present desert landscape. On our bikes again, Charlie leads the way. They're onto something, I guess to myself, because they go fast, faster than I want to.

There's too much to watch for. The trees get thicker and we're climbing again. Everyone stops. From this ridge I can see there's something strange going on with the land here. We've lost the road. The glaciers came this far and stopped.

From the ridge the land dips low, forms a sort of concave saucer pressed into the tundra. On the other side, there's more trees, thicker trees, a truly forested area. Then density makes me think there's got to be something in there. Charlie thinks so too. He tells us to wait behind while he checks out the potential route below. In a matter of minutes he gestures that we follow. "Single file line" he says. "Stay right behind me."

Ugh, I wish I were riding with someone else. Better yet, I wish I weren't riding this motor bike at all. It collides with every aspect of the land we travel through. The noise, their capacity for speed, the rough way the tires touch the ground and move forward. Cars, planes, motor bikes: machines that illustrate a sort of hypocrisy surrounding eco-travel. Yet it is always the traveler that acts the part of the hypocrite, and in recognizing this I can't exclude myself. I'd like to say camels, horses, or reindeer were the locals' mode of transportation here. I'd like to say I was different.

Around my legs there's bramble everywhere, bramble and willow and silence. Nothing moves as we lower the caravan into the saucer, making our way to the trees. The landscape changes dramatically in only a few miles. We've entered hummock-land where hills roll beneath our feet.

Hummocks are a quality of tundra that only the complex imagination of nature could dream up. They become themselves with time, with rain and freezing water, melting snow. Moisture and heat shrink the land until each section of raised earth looks like a relic from the head-hunters of Indonesia planted in the ground. Imagine bubble-wrap, enlarged ten-thou-

sand times and then spread over a damp, mushy land. Now imagine that each bubble freezes and water runs between them, causing each bubble to rise higher and higher, to become more segregated from the even surface of the earth. Now the bubble partially thaws, more moss grows over it and insulates the ground below. Eventually, the surface of the earth is quilted, pillow-like, uneven, and utterly unnavigable.

There are various theories as to why and how hummocks form. Bottom line is, the permafrost, long freezing periods, hardy mosses, and meltwater all contribute to the creation of hummocks. Hummocks are common in the Arctic. They grow larger here in the Subarctic, because there's more time for the earth to thaw than in higher latitudes. These are the worst I've seen yet. They are large and spread out, moguls on snow-free land. We roll and roll; my legs go a different direction than my arms, I can't keep steady over the handlebars, cameras bounce around and I yell ahead for everyone to stop so I can add another bungee-cord to my pack.

It takes thirty minutes to get across an area less than a quarter-mile. We rise above the hummock-land back to the forest edge. A path is worn into the ground. Caribou. The barren-ground herd migrate through the taiga to reach their calving grounds to the north and gather near the bay to escape mosquitoes and warble flies. Their trail here is a haunting sign that life moves through these parts. So far we've seen nothing that moves by its own will, just the rearrangement of living matter by wind.

We weave in and out of trees, dodge large branches that have fallen and lie decaying on the forest floor. The trail breaks off, disappears. Thick undergrowth tangles around the wheel axles and gets caught up in the straps of exposed gear. Once in the forest we each take a different way, all heading in the same direction.

There is a considerable amount of sound among the spruce. The forest is not austere. The trees chatter back and forth and some old ones creak deep and sigh at our passing. White spruce surround me. Through the trees I watch the men measure distance over their handlebars. They, too, are looking for signs of life.

Up ahead through the trees the forest empties into a lake sunk deep in the land. The water begins five feet from the top of the bank so it looks like a man-made reservoir. We circle the ridge and find not one nesting bird. The lake seems out of synch with the mood of the tundra, much like the deceptive quality of the conglomerate road. I could swim in the small body of water but its lack of life supplicates my more rational self. Seventy-five degrees. The temperature has risen and mosquitoes are swarming.

Back into the forest we go. The trees don't part their limbs to allow us to pass, raking my arms with theirs. Wind has more success in getting its way with trees. The still coolness in the forest keeps mosquitoes at bay. We take the same way back, and ease into the hummock-swamp, one by one. The ride lurches me more and more. This time the water bottle flies out of the basket, along with a camera, my bag of snacks, and the

---

*Hummocks are a  
quality of tundra that only the  
complex imagination of nature could  
dream up. They become themselves  
with time, with freezing water,  
melting snow.*

---



binoculars. Everyone is ahead of me again so I hurry and try to gather everything up. Charlie doubles back once everyone is on higher land. The ground here is like a fat sponge filled with water. I press my fingers into the peat bog and the hummocks ooze with moisture. I taste. Earthy, fresh, cold. The hummocks are alive and breathing.

Mosquito hatches occur in swarms once we're in the sunshine again. They blow fast into my eyes as I drive through weakening rows of trees. *Screech!* The bike wants to keep going. I clamp down on the brakes with both hands, coaxing the machine to a stop. Everyone else blazed past, their eyes on the horizon, and they missed it.

I turn around and make my way back to a sort of doorway among boulders and shrubs. I turn the bike off twenty feet from the entrance. Here, partially shielded from view, I find a caged arctic fox. It is outside the forest, caught between tundra and treeline. It is trapped in the in-between.

The fox has a wild look in his eyes. His white fur is turning colors. Like the willow ptarmigan it, too, is piebald—dark tufts of fur crowd out his winter coat. This change makes him like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde mammal—deranged, out of sorts. All I can do is look in at him. I am stalled, stunned—do I open the cage and risk the fox biting me? Who knows how long it's been here? He turns circles inside the cage, I can see his paws spreading over the wires, separating the pads of his feet.

The others have figured out I've stopped—I hear them coming. TM grabs his camera. Every photographer I've been around documents first, grieves next. Charlie guesses aloud the trap was set by scientists doing research on how fox affect the goose population. He crosses his arms and shakes his head. Charlie tells us the research is targeted to understanding the effect of arctic fox, natural predators of nesting birds' eggs and their downy young, on the local bird population. This study is poorly-timed, to say the least. The snow goose population is at an all-time high. For the first time in recent history, snow geese are in danger of devastating their own nesting grounds.

Last year, snow goose hunting season was extended to the spring throughout parts of the central flyway. This includes Manitoba, parts of Saskatchewan, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Texas, and other states that border the general region. Spring hunts have customarily not been allowed since the Fish and Wildlife Service implemented hunting regulations on waterfowl in 1932.

Anger is what comes after a glimpse of sorrow. This is the first arctic fox we've seen, and it's going nuts in a 4x1x1 cage. I can see we are just adding to its concern. *What happens when they come for it? Do they tranquilize it?* I have one million questions to which no one has a definite answer. The cage sits directly in the sunlight. Mosquitoes have found their way to the corner of its eyes. It leans deep into the far corner of the cage, as far away as it can get from us, cowering with anxiety.

Charlie's looking for a stick to pry the cage open. *I'm surprised it's not dead, pacing back and forth in this heat,* TM says. *It's totally dehydrated.* The fox's tongue hangs far out of its mouth, pink and dry. TM gives me the video command. I film with hesitation. I feel disrespectful, capturing something so desperate on film. This fox, if foxes might know humiliation, must feel it at this moment.

TM reminds me that part of our responsibility in documenting the natural world is to pass on information to the proper channels and educate those who are not familiar with the issues at hand. This is my eighth trip with TM. Parts

of a person melt down with travel; their personality becomes a bridge, instead of an obstacle, to understanding issues in a different light. TM, with his background in the sciences, makes for an interesting compliment to my education in the humanities—we continue to see things in infinitely distinct ways. All I can say is that this fox may have been a casualty to its study, rather than something to learn from, had it sat and paced and rushed all day in the heat. I am glad we came across it.

I get only forty seconds of footage while Charlie is working with the release hatch. He jerks the release back and forth. The cage has been used many times before; it is rusty and the latch won't let go. He gives it another hard jerk, moving the entire cage. The fox balks, hisses at us, and the cage opens. For a split-second, the arctic fox hesitates in the cage. It gives us a final once-over, and bolts. He never looks back.

The forest is a place of transition, of transformation, especially in the natural world. This is what it teaches me today. Life changes instinctively here: birds disguised as winter, foxes in camouflage to roam the summer tundra. In *Memory Fever*, Ray Gonzalez writes of his experience at White Sands National Monument. Museum specimens showed that certain desert creatures had adapted to their vulnerable surroundings—a taxidermied rattlesnake shines from behind the glass, its eerie whiteness proof that the natural world does change according to its environment.

The forest is in flux. White arctic fox, white ptarmigan that move through the winter like wind, invisible and real: they are but shadows of the seasons they survive. All around me, the forest is still. Nothing moves here in spite of my quiet stance among white spruce. In the treetops I hear stories, a past shifting with the wind. They whisper to me—animals' lives are changing.



Melissa Walker

## A Good Time or a Bad Time

Almost everything I remember about childhood took place in and around Dublin, Georgia. Much of what I remember happening inside houses is tinged with anxiety or boredom, but as soon as I place myself in the outdoors—climbing a mimosa or a chinaberry tree; camping out in the back yard in a war surplus pup tent; setting off alone for a trek through the woods; catching crawfish and picking scuppernongs—the emotional climate of memory changes. Only in the outdoors do I remember feeling lighthearted and carefree. Inside closed rooms I felt—and sometimes still feel—oppressed and stifled and sad. My child spirit flourished best outdoors in the heat and humidity of a south Georgia summer day. Although the winter months in south Georgia are mild and almost every month of the year will have at least a few warm days, I remember suffocating in closed off, overheated living rooms; shivering in ice cold bathrooms where I was forced to bathe in luke warm water; and suffering the application of a mustard plaster intended to clear the congestion that had settled in my chest after a winter cold. Although there may have been fewer than ninety days of what southerners call cold weather, winter seemed endless and wearisome. Warm weather came in fits and starts. Daffodils and forsythia bloomed in February; cherry, pear, and peach in March by the first of April dogwood and azalea were in full bloom and the air was full of pollen. On the first day of May, my mother allowed me to shed my shoes after school and go barefoot. Real summer began a month later, and days tended to blur one into the other. Most of my memories of those days are laid down in broad strokes. I see myself climbing trees, catching crawfish and tadpoles wading in creeks; swimming in cold water springs; hiding out with my dog in the woods. Only a few memories stand out in vivid detail. One stands out from the rest:

Baskets of peaches are spread out on a white cloth covering a card table. Stenciled and painted on the corners of the table cloth are clusters of grapes, cherries, blackberries, and wild plums. Scattered over the cloth are multi-colored butterflies. Behind the table is a nine-year-old girl dressed in a blue gingham dress. Her hair is parted in the middle and plaited in two pigtails that reach almost to her waist. At her feet is a bushel basket half full of peaches, and a pair of Mary Jane shoes stuffed with white socks that she has taken off to enjoy the feel of sand and grass between her toes. Tied to a nearby tree is a black cocker spaniel named Rip. Behind the sidewalk scene is her great grandmother's large white columned house. A sign written in purple crayon tacked to a tree advises passersby that they can buy a small basket of peaches for a quarter or one for a nickel. The peaches are Georgia Belles, ripe, sweet, and sunset colored on the outside and white with a rosy tint on the inside. It's a ninety degree day in late June. The year is 1950.

"I'd like one of those peaches" an old black woman is

saying as she struggles to untie the knot that secures the small coins tied in the rag of a handkerchief she uses as a purse.

"How about a whole basket?" the child asks.

"No ma'am, I'll just take one," the old woman says as she empties the contents of her handkerchief—a nickel, a dime, and two pennies—into her gnarled hand.

"You can have a basket for a dime," the child says, looking at the woman's pitiful purse.

"Lord, chile, your daddy gonna be mad if you give me that many peaches for a dime."

"No, you can have them for a dime," the child says as she reaches for the dime in the old woman's hand.

But at the last minute the child feels her throat tighten and she hesitates. She can't bring herself to take the dime.

"I made a mistake," she says. "This basket of peaches is free."

"Thank you chile. God loves you."

That hot June day turned out to be the beginning and end of my career in business. To please my father, I'd saved my allowance to buy a bushel of peaches to sell from a card table fruit stand in front of my grandmother's house. My father had in mind teaching me something about earning money, how to buy low and sell

high. I had paid a dollar for the bushel of peaches, but at the end of the day, all the peaches were gone, and I'd collected only sixty-five.

While I don't remember being punished for giving away the peaches, I know that my father was disappointed. I suspect that he mumbled something about how hopeless it was to teach women the value of a dollar and how I could have doubled my money if I'd only been smart. Even then I felt torn. Giving away the peaches made me happy; displeasing my father made me anxious and a little sad. I had felt my spirit soar as I passed a full basket of tree ripened Georgia Belles into the hands of an impoverished old woman, and I felt them plummet again when I noted the disapproval on my father's face.

While I didn't learn much about turning a profit, I did learn that day something about privilege. I could while a way a hot summer day playing with money while an old woman could spend that same day cleaning and cooking and still come home with only seventeen cents. It would be years before I would learn about how domestic servants in the south were often in debt to their employers, and that they might work all week only to forfeit their wages to pay back the five or ten dollars they had borrowed the week before. I must also have learned that pleasing one person often means displeasing another, and that because of such conflicts, it was often impossible to please myself.

When I say I learned these things, I don't mean that I had words to express them, but that deep in my being I felt the discrepancy between that old woman's life and mine and between giving away peaches and doubling my investment. It would be decades before the memory of that day would help me understand how my own privileged life had begun to feel impoverished and how I had to leave that life for a while before I could let go of what was killing my spirit.

Looking back, I see myself feeling deeply the absence of a kind of experience that I may have had only in childhood, if then. I'd lost what I'll call generosity of spirit, a feeling of pleasure when I reached out to others. I'd grown fearful of be-



Photo: Kelley Segars



ing used up by other people's demands, and I'd felt my life spirit drain away.

It was just after my fiftieth birthday, after a lifetime of mainly staying put, that I began to feel restless and burdened, crushed under the weight of obligations. I felt that I rarely had time to do something for someone else out of a sense of freedom and joy. After doing my work or meeting the requests and needs of others, there was no time and no energy left for spontaneity or serendipity. After about a year of such restlessness, I began to think that I had to leave home for a while if I were ever again to feel the joy of being there by choice.

When I tried to explain to one friend that "My life is not working," she didn't seem to understand.

"What do you mean your life is not working? What do you expect? You've got a good husband, normal children, parents who are good to you, friends, a nice house, your work as a writer. You even have your health. What more do you want?"

I wanted to be able to choose where I spend my life energy and to feel that what I do counts for something bigger than meeting the superficial needs of a few other privileged people. I wanted to be free of those who had taken advantage of what was left of that childlike impulse to give away a basket of peaches. I wanted to replace the feeling that I had allowed others to use me with the pleasure of freely giving to the people and ventures I felt drawn to. I wanted saying "no" to be a way of saying "yes" to what I really felt drawn to do in the world. I wanted to be passionate about whatever I did, and to withdraw from resignation as from a coiled rattlesnake.

A few friends understood that my decision to spend several months alone exploring and learning about wilderness in the American West was not a trivial matter.

"I think you're going to claim your life," one friend said.

My friend Carol was more insistent. "You're going on a spiritual journey. It may take a long time, and I suspect the journey will continue after you get home."

I balked at the word spiritual. No, I thought to myself, Carol doesn't understand. I tried to explain that getting away was about being alone, exploring and learning about wilderness and freeing myself from a few people whose perceptions were obscured by the darkest of clouds and whose own privileged lives were tainted with cynicism and resignation. And yes, it was about claiming my spirit and creating a life fueled by something other than adrenaline and a sense of duty.

When I tried to explain some of this to Carol, she looked at me with her steady gaze. "That's what I mean by spiritual. Something other than adrenaline and a sense of duty. I'm talking about something more fundamental, something bigger than yourself that moves you, that gives you a sense of meaning and purpose."

By the time I left home, Jerome, my parents, my children, and a few close friends all accepted my decision to go literally and metaphorically into the wilderness—and to go alone.

"You stay as long as you need to stay, sugar girl," my father said when I called that August day in 1993 to say good-bye.

"You have two choices," my mother said. "You can have a good time, or a bad time. I always choose the good. You will too."

My mother's words I had heard before, but in her old age, her lifelong counsel that people can choose happiness even in bad circumstances became more insistent. My father's words were new. Somehow at the age eighty-three, he was able to let go of his traditional views of a woman's place and to give his then fifty-year old daughter permission to seek a different kind of bounty from the material abundance he had spent so much of his life acquiring. Even though they knew I would be going into remote places where I could not be reached by telephone sometimes for days, my parents made me feel that they approved of me and what I was up to. They seemed to know that what might appear to others to be an entirely selfish act—leaving my husband to take total responsibility for the household,



my aging parents without easy access to me, and various friends to fend for themselves—was in fact necessary if I were to live as if what I did mattered. Maybe they sensed that spirit had somehow gone out of my life and that I was on a journey to rekindle a joy in living. When I called them from the road, my parents were interested in what I was doing and assured me that they were well. Not once did they urge me to come home. And they both somehow managed to stay healthy until I came home.

To most southerners, "Home" is the place where they were born and grew up. Like many people my age in the south, I lived in one place until I left to go to college, and that place is the center of a larger geographical area—extending from the Georgia sea islands and the Okefenokee swamp in the south to the Appalachian mountains in the North. Even though I have lived in the same house in Atlanta with Jerome and our children for almost a quarter of a century, our house there is only one of many linked elements that all together comprise home.

Home is the sun setting behind a cotton field, a cold water spring bubbling out of the ground and flowing into a river swamp, a small pond surrounded with second growth cypress, and a red clay road winding through acres and acres of pines. Home is a stand of blooming peach trees in the spring and a pecan orchard raining sweet nuts all over the ground in the fall. It's a towering oak tree I planted as a seedling and the wild rose that's the last remnant of my grandmother's once carefully tended garden. Home is the way the trees grow, the land lays, and the scent of a skunk or honeysuckle lingers in still air. Home is the past, memory, a time gone by. Home is more than the sum of its parts, more than a house, a river, cotton fields, red clay, a wild rose, or fat little pecans hiding in wet leaves.

Before I went away for the first time, I would have said that Jerome and I have stayed in the south out of a sense of obligation to be near our parents. Now it seems that we stayed in Georgia because we felt pulled to be there; we wanted to be there. When people I met asked where my home was, I simply said "Georgia," and I said it with feeling. It would be a long time before I'd learn that it is possible to hold that intense attachment to one place in tension with a passion for other places and other ways of life.

I wasn't comfortable putting a label on my feelings. They were too complex, too varied, too up and down to fit in a particular pigeon hole. No one who knew me would have thought I was depressed. I got up early and stayed up late. I was busy and productive. Many people depended on me. I had moved way beyond being good citizen, friend, wife, mother, daughter, niece. There were so many people who expected something of me that I began to feel I was neglecting those who had the most claim on me—my children, my parents, my Aunt Virginia, and a few close friends. I'd lost all pleasure in doing for others. I felt used up, that there was nothing left to give.

Yet I continued going through the motions—visiting my parents, helping Richard and Monica plan their wedding, flying to California to spend a few days with Laura, taking her shopping and out for nice meals she couldn't afford, meeting friends for lunch, sitting with others in hospitals, taking flowers to acquaintances in nursing homes, and all the while feeling used up, spent, scattered, angry, dead.

For a long while I resisted talking to friends about these feelings. I knew that my life was easier, even better, than most of theirs. I had friends and acquaintances who were dealing with demanding jobs and rebellious teenagers at the same time; several with parents suffering from Alzheimer's, another with a husband with the life-threatening complications of diabetes; and more than one with breast cancer. It was not necessary to recall homeless women wandering the streets begging for small change to feel that I had no right to feel that there was anything wrong with my life. To speak of my own dissatisfac-

tion would sound like the whining complaints of a spoiled child.

When I finally told Jerome and a few friends that I didn't want to go on living as I was, I wasn't able to explain exactly what particular changes I wanted to make. There were people that I simply wanted out of my life. No I didn't want a divorce and no I didn't want to move away from Georgia. I loved my house, my garden, my family, my work, and most of the people who called me their friend. I did not love the pace of my life or the feeling that I was living someone else's life rather than my own. After spending more than a year studying and writing about the environment, I longed to go out and see wild places in the west. An extended trip into wilderness areas would serve two purposes: I would learn first hand about many of the environmental issues that were making headlines and I would separate myself from everyone I knew in order to re-think my life.

Before I left, I had a little cleaning up to do. I had some straight talk with two people, explaining that if we were to remain connected at all, the way we related to each other would have to change radically. When several friends asked if they could join me on one of my adventures, I managed to say "no" to everybody except Marjorie, who was suffering the debilitating effects of chemotherapy. We agreed that when she started feeling better we would talk about the possibility of meeting somewhere.

I knew that what I longed for and was willing to take some risks to have could not be bought and sold. Although I couldn't have articulated it then, I now think that Carol was right. was looking for a life fueled with passion for something bigger than the immediate needs and concerns of my own personal life and those of others. I don't think I ever thought that I would renounce my responsibilities to those I loved, but I found that in order to have a life that made room for larger concerns than the personal, I would have to limit the number of people I cared for in a personal way. And I have had to draw boundaries around that caring and protect myself from those whose needs or demands seem insatiable or whose behavior or attitudes sap my energy.

When I left home for the first time, I felt compelled to answer those who insistently asked me "why?" When people asked what I was up to, I talked about having adventures, learning about wilderness areas in America and about the forces that threaten them, and preparing myself to be more effective as an environmental activist and writer. While all of this was true, it was not the whole story. The decision to go was intensified by the life-and-death feeling that I had to change my way of living and relating to others or I would sink into resignation, despair, and cynicism. I believed that by going away, I would do things differently when I returned. I would learn to say "no." I would untangle myself from the web of relationships that I thought were sapping my life energy. In the beginning I thought of change in negative terms, as freeing myself by not doing what I had so long felt compelled to do. In the end, that negative shifted to the positive as I thought of doing only what seemed important, of choosing my responsibilities with care. I had no idea in the beginning how much would change and down how many roads my journey would take me. I had no idea that something I call my spirit would gradually evolve until I felt alive and joyful in ways I could not remember feeling before.

When I finally went on the road and surrendered to the unknown, I began to feel the shackles that were binding my spirit fall away.



Out of nowhere, a coyote crossed the road and disappeared into sage and grass. I was standing alone by the side of Highway 287 on the way to Lander, Wyoming. I felt my spirits lift. I listened to the silence and looked in every direction and stared out at all that emptiness through what seemed like clean air. I was stunned by the beauty of a 360 degree horizon, by the silence and the absence of human activity. I had arrived where I wanted to be. After some time, I got back in the car and continued on my way. Soon I would pull on hiking boots and head into the wilderness.

I drove into Lander in the early afternoon and wandered around until I found a bookstore where I collected information about the town and its people and about the vast wilderness area that begins just a few miles to the west. There I learned that I could camp in a public park just outside of town along the grassy banks of the Pope Agie—pronounced popozha—River. There was no one else in the park, and for two hours after I set up my tent, I sat alone by the river, listening to the water, the birds chattering above, and horses neighing in the distance. I had no nagging anxieties, no sense of unfinishedness. There was nothing I needed, no one I wanted to see, nothing I had to do. I had come to Lander to meet Ken Clanton, who had agreed to be my wilderness guide and teacher for a few days, but I could call and tell him I'd be a day or two late. I could even tell him to forget the whole thing. Then I could settle into this spot, take long walks down the dirt road that began on the other side of the river, walk into town for a hearty breakfast, and give up the idea of pulling on a backpack and going into the wilderness with this strange man that Emie Fokes had described as the best guide as well one of the smartest men he knew. Emie had also told me that the Pope Agie Wilderness was one of the wildest places in the lower forty-eight. Full of bear, moose, elk, and deer, it was a hunter's paradise. Hunting season, however, didn't start for several weeks, and the weather report was for near perfect days. There might never be a better time for me to get my feet wet in a major designated wilderness area. Besides, I'd made a commitment, and Ken was waiting for me.

When I arrived at Ken's place, his two dogs Melissa and Tessabelle met me at the curb, checked me out, and then ran back to the house to let Ken know I'd come. What to say about Ken Clanton? First of all, he was not like anyone I'd ever met. He was macho without having a macho act; he was generous and kind without being patronizing; sexy without being seductive. In his mid-forties, he still had the playfulness of a much younger man. His temperament in animal terms was somewhere between bear and puppy. Shortly after I arrived, he showed me a picture of his beautiful, young girl friend. Lest there be any misunderstanding.

In the time we spent together, Ken never once seemed to be in a hurry. He was the first person I ever met who seemed to live on wilderness time all the time. Whatever he had to do he took the time to do it well. He never seemed to let thoughts about what came next spoil the pleasure of the moment. This is not to say that I had any sense at all of the inner workings of the man. He was also reserved, and if he had anxieties, he kept them to himself.

His passion was wilderness, and shortly after we met, we were sitting at his kitchen table looking at topo maps and planning our trip into the Wind River Range the next day. Ken told me about fishing trips, hunting adventures, and climbing expeditions. He told me about nearly dying of exposure and warned me that if I fell into the Pope Agie River I could be dead in minutes. Ken's near death stories, however, always focused on survival: Don't fall in icy water, and if you do, know how to build a fire in a driving rain.

The park was still deserted when I returned to my campsite at dusk. After eating a cold supper of yogurt, fruit,

and cookies, I lay on the grass outside the tent, and watched the stars appear one at a time in a moonless sky. I was ready to begin the next day's adventure. But first I needed rest. I lay under the sky until it was awash with starlight, and I fell asleep almost as soon as I zipped up my sleeping bag. I'd spent the last four nights in campgrounds—the first in the woods north of Little Rock, near the town of Dalhart, Texas, and the next two in a National Forest outside the Rocky Mountain National Park. Not once had I been troubled by other campers. But that night in Lander I was afraid for the first time since I left home five days before. Around midnight I woke with a start to the sound of approaching motor cycles. A few minutes later a group of men and women noisily set up camp arguing all the time about how many miles they'd gone and who owed whom sixty dollars. For a while I lay awake needing to go to the bathroom, but afraid to leave the cover of my tent. Somehow I managed to fall asleep in spite of my uneasiness, and it was broad daylight before I woke again.

As I crawled from my tent, I noticed the camp set up the night before. There were three small tents and four large Harley-Davidson bikes. A bedraggled, middle-aged woman emerged just as I passed by on the way to the bathroom. She looked me in the eye and smiled.

"Looks like we got another good day," she said.

"Yeah, we do," I answered, feeling a little foolish for being afraid a few hours before. I also began to feel a sense of urgency, and I knew that my journey into the wilderness could not wait. I spent the morning gathering supplies and loading my pack. When I went to Ken's house, he was sitting in the shade smoking a pipe. He looked up without moving as I walked across the grass with Melissa and Tessabelle romping around me.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Almost. I've still got to put food in this damn bear can."

"What's a bear can?"

"It's this contraption that Jerome bought me to keep food in. Bears can't open it."

"Looks pretty heavy and cumbersome to me. You willing to pack it in?"

"Sure," I said brashly.

From Lander we drove in Ken's truck up a narrow dirt road miles from nowhere. We arrived at the Forest Service campground at Fiddler's Lake in the late afternoon, built a fire, made dinner, and talked about the day ahead. I was setting up my tent when a woman and her husband, the only other campers, came over to warn us that a large aggressive sow and her cub had been spotted in the campground.

"We're sleeping in our truck," she said. "You may want to do the same."

Ken promised me that the dogs would not tolerate bears, and so I climbed into my tent feeling only a little uneasy. The dogs slept with Ken in his truck, not far away, but during the night when the bears did in fact come rooting around within a few feet of my tent, I called out for help. No answer. Ken never heard me and the dogs never barked. I knew that the bears in this part of the Winds are black bears and that they are less likely than grizzlies to attack people, but there was no way I could sleep until I thought the bears were gone. The woman had said that the sow she'd seen weighed about four hundred pounds. I lay frozen in my sleeping bag, and in a matter of minutes the bears came back, snuffling, snorting, and grumbling around the edges of my tent. Again I shouted for help, and again the bears were quiet. For a long time I lay there listening to night sounds, and from time to time I heard what I imagined were raccoons and smaller night critters. The bears did not return.

The next morning I was awakened by a loud bellow-



ing. Excited by the prospect of seeing what I imagined were elk, I scrambled into my clothes and rushed out to encounter a herd of cattle wandering through the forest. That was the first time I knew what anyone associated with ranching in the west knows: there are cows in the wilderness. I had thought that grazing rights on federal lands were limited to the open range administered by the Bureau of Land Management. Not so, Ken told me. Many ranchers hold permits to graze cattle in national forests and even designated wilderness areas.

Later I learned that cows in wilderness areas are rarely monitored. If they are watched over at all, it is by Peruvian or Basque herders who don't speak English. Problems caused by grazing in the wilderness, I was told by forest service officers, aren't being addressed because forest service personnel fail to enforce the guidelines. While I now know that there are cows and other livestock in the wilderness, I don't know what impact they are having on these fragile places. Except in the most general way, apparently nobody else knows either. Ken promised me that there would not be any cows where we were going next.

It was afternoon before we began the slow five-and-a-half mile climb from Fiddlers Lake to Lower Silas Lake. Ken's large external frame pack was loaded with dog food and significant cooking gear as well as the usual supplies, but Ken showed no signs of stress as he kept up a steady pace. Unaccustomed to the altitude and inexperienced in carrying a forty-five pound pack, I felt pain with almost every step—sometimes in the hip, sometimes the knee, always in the shoulders. I carried most of the food in the bear can strapped on top of my pack, and when I bent over to pick something up, it banged against the back of my head. Most of the time we had a clear, dry trail—except when it turned to deep slippery mud, negotiable only by stepping from one boulder to another, or when it dead-ended at a rushing stream. Ken helped me across the rushing water by carrying his pack to the other side, coming back for mine, and then talking me across boulders or a wobbly log that served as a bridge.

The sun was low in the sky when we finally broke out of the lodgepole and limber pine forest into a sweeping open meadow common to the Wind River Range at high altitudes, this one 10,160 feet above sea level. The size of three or four football fields, the meadow is bisected by Silas Creek that flows from the lake. I slipped the pack off my back, and the pain slowly faded as I looked out at golden grasses, multicolored wild flowers, the lake, the mountains beyond, and blue sky above it all. It was 6:00 p.m. when we selected a campsite near the banks of Lower Silas Lake. Ken pitched a large tent, big enough for himself, the dogs, and considerable gear. Close by I put up my small backpacking tent. Then we set off in separate directions to explore the area. I found moose tracks, lots of deer droppings, and one pile of bear scat, but no animals.

Later, back at the camp site, we built a fire and Ken cooked our evening meal—pasta flavored with spinach soup, cheese, and sardines. Not exactly what I would choose for dinner guests, but given my appetite, the strange concoction tasted pretty good. Looking out across the lake, we saw no other signs of campfires. We were surely the only people in the area. After we cleaned up from dinner, Ken taught me to how to "bear bag," that is to hang the food from a tree limb to keep bears from getting it. We hung some of the dog food and a few bulky items and put the rest of our food in the bear can and set it some distance from our camp. Ken and the dogs crawled into their tent. For the next hour or so I sat cross legged and alert at the edge of my tent, listening and peering into the darkness. The only sounds were Ken's snoring and a steadily intensifying wind blowing through the pines.

I was almost too tired to sleep, and every muscle in my body ached. Not knowing what animals might be just be-

yond the campsite, I was afraid to go into the bushes. I knew, however, if I didn't do something about my full bladder, I'd have to get up in the middle of the night. In the end I crept about twenty feet away from the tent, terrified that I might bump into the moose that had made the large pile I'd seen down by the water.

Minutes after crawling into my sleeping bag I fell into a deep sleep and was disturbed only once by the thumping sound of what I imagined was a moose. When I woke the next morning, Ken and the dogs were still sleeping; all was quiet except for an occasional trout breaking the stillness of the water. I was glad to have time to myself. I looked around, saw fresh moose scat, then walked up into the trees and dug the requisite six inch hole. I tried as best I could to wash up with the equivalent of a cup of water. When I looked in a mirror, I saw a face so puffy I hardly recognized it. I had a slight headache, probably caused by the altitude. I looked down at my swollen hands and at my wedding ring which was now too tight to remove. I'm a mess, I thought, as I ran a comb through my hair. But I didn't care. I looked out at the incomparable beauty of the place and forgot about myself.

By the time Ken and the dogs emerged from what I had begun to fear was hibernation, I was starving. Although he insisted on cooking breakfast himself, Ken was a slow starter. Eventually Melissa, Tessabelle and I shared three large granola pancakes soaked in maple syrup while Ken smoked his pipe and sipped the strong coffee he made in a Turkish coffee maker. It was nearly 10:00 a.m. when we put away the cooking gear and began the day's activities.

First Ken taught me how to build a fire—how to find dry material to burn even in the rain, how to lay the most flammable material loosely on the bottom and then add increasingly large pieces of wood around that, how to leave an opening for the match, and finally how to keep it going once it's started. My first attempt at starting a fire failed. Ken gave me six matches. When the last one went out, I still did not have a flame. I hadn't left an opening and was trying to ignite my rather precarious structure of pine straw, bark, twigs, and rosin from the edge rather than the center. With Ken's coaching, I started over, and this time I got a good fire going with the first match.

Next came map and compass lessons. Learning to take a bearing and to travel cross-country from one place to another was easier than building a fire. Ken and I studied the topo map and identified various topographical features around us. Then he told me to choose a place on the map and to use the compass to get there and back to camp. I chose one of the nearby nameless lakes, took the appropriate bearings, and lining up trees one after another, walked straight there. Still we saw no sign of people. Ken went off with his fly rod, and I climbed up a hill and sat on a rock above the water to watch the ever changing scene as a gusting and shifting wind played on the water and clouds.

Back in camp, I prepared for the final lesson: "Surviving a Thunderstorm." Wyoming is famous for its afternoon electrical storms, and most mountaineers have a collection of near death stories. Ken, however, focuses on survival:

1. Look around for the highest topographical formation, a mountain top or a ridge, and quickly move to a lower position, at least half the height of the peak or ridge.
2. In such a position, you are probably safer on top of a boulder than under it, as electricity from a lightning strike travels through the ground. Never go into a cave.
3. Get rid of all metal objects: packs, ice ax, keys, belt buckles, cameras, guns.
4. If you are in a grove of trees, notice the tallest tree and make sure that you are at least one half of its height away from it.



5. A group of people should spread out but stay within sight of each other.

6. Squat down, don't sit, and don't put your hands on the ground.

I tried to imagine myself shedding cameras, belt, keys, and pack while hauling full speed down a mountain. Or squatting through the storm without touching my hands to the ground, realized that instinct would have led me to do exactly the opposite of what Ken recommended. While I knew to get off the mountain top or ridge, I would probably grab the nearest person to huddle with me under a boulder rather than squat on top alone. I looked around for the tallest tree and tried to determine where to go to be half its height away. I wasn't sure. Of all the possible dangers in the wilderness, lightning frightened me the most.

Years before on a day hike, Jerome and I had been caught in a violent thunderstorm at about 13,000 feet on the ridge connecting Pawnee and Toll Peaks in the Never Summer Range of Colorado. We were with a group of about eight people. None of us shed our metal belongings, but we rapidly descended together by sliding more than 2,000 feet down a glacier that spilled us into a boulder studded snow field below. Everyone survived the glissade, but we still had to cross over a snow bridge that traversed a rushing stream. The bridge held, and once on the other side we descended still further until we were below the tree line. We were down off the ridge, and though the lightning still crashed above, we imagined that we were safe.

I looked up from my reverie at Ken, who also seemed last in some distant thunder storm of the past.

"Think we'll have a storm today?" I asked.

"Nope," he answered scanning the bluer than blue skies, marked only with rapidly moving puffy, white cumulus clouds. "Let's go fishing."

Ken was determined to add some protein to our evening meal. We hiked around the western shore of Lower Silas Lake until he found the perfect spot. Scrambling up on some rocks, he stood on a ledge and caught two cut-throat trout in only three perfect casts of the fly rod.

At Ken's instruction, I went off to find wild edibles to supplement our dinner. He suggested I look for rose crown, a low growing plant found exclusively at the water's edge at high altitudes. He told me not to pick the whole plant but to take only one or two sprigs from each. After about thirty minutes of searching, I half filled a gallon sized zip lock bag. That night we had a fine dinner: a rose crown salad with peanuts, Bacon-Bits, and vinaigrette; cut throat trout pasta, and hot chocolate and a Snickers candy bar for dessert.

Again, Ken, Melissa, and Tessabelle went to bed early, while I sat cross legged at the edge of my tent and listened to the silence for about an hour before turning in. I don't know how long I had been sleeping when I heard the commotion—scuffling, shouting, and running. This time I had slept through the bears' arrival, and Ken had to tell me about the large 300 pound sow and her cub that he chased away. The sow was going after the food hanging from a nearby tree; she had also knocked the bear can down and rolled it around without opening it. Even I had trouble opening the bear can, which required using a coin to turn a recessed catch and then pressing a button to spring it open. Until bears learned to carry quarters and dimes on their nocturnal raids, food in bear cans would be safe.

I woke the next morning totally uninterested in breaking camp. I longed to stay in the back country for at least another week, and of course I dreaded loading up and carrying my still heavy pack. I wandered around the lake and climbed up on a large boulder. Silence. Nothing tugged on me. If someone had asked me how I felt at that moment, I would have answered in the negative. I didn't feel anxious, and I wasn't

worried about anything. I didn't feel guilty about what I wasn't doing. The man in the tent with the two dogs was my hired guide. Period. He expected and apparently wanted nothing from me. Somewhere nearby a bear and her cub that had visited us in the night were searching for food, perhaps already feasting on berries or grubs. The moose that left the pile near my tent might be browsing in the willows by the water. I, on the other hand, had nothing whatever to do. I was at peace, satisfied, grateful, and happy. I had left behind everything that made me anxious.

The best way to talk yourself out of the back country is to think of the pleasures of civilization ahead. But as it turned out I could only think of two: a cold drink untainted with the iodine tablets we had used to treat the lake water we'd been drinking and a hot shower. There was no way a restaurant meal in Lander, Wyoming could compete with cutthroat trout pasta, rose crown salad, or Ken's granola pancakes.

Silas Creek flows into the Little Pope Agie river which then flows into the middle fork of the Pope Agie through Sinks Canyon. The three forks coalesce in the town of Hudson. From there the Pope Agie flows north through the Owl Creek Mountains. At the Wedding of the Waters it becomes the Big Horn, which flows into the Yellowstone, which flows into the Missouri, and then into the Mississippi. Before we broke camp, I wandered out to the marshy area where Silas creek exits from Lower Silas Lake. It was here that I'd gathered the rose crown for our dinner salad the night before. I looked at the water flowing slowly out from the lake and I wondered how long it would be before this water would be added to the already swollen and flooded Mississippi. It had taken me only six days to get from Memphis to this spot, but I suspected that the water, which had a long circuitous route to follow, would take much longer to pass under the Memphis bridge.

I also would head north before going south again. For once in my life I had declared my whereabouts, my rate of travel, and my projected arrival dates unimportant. No one could count on me to be at a particular place at a particular time. Sometime before Thanksgiving, I thought. Surely the water now flowing out of Silas Creek would be lost in the Gulf of Mexico long before I crossed the Mississippi again.

The trip back down to Fiddlers Lake was easy in comparison to the struggle up. In the three days I had adapted to the altitude and my pack was a few pounds lighter. The log across the bridgeless river seemed wider and more stable than it had coming up, and I was a little more skilled at keeping up my momentum while boulder hopping across shallow waters. Back at the truck, Ken handed me a cold seven-up and opened a beer for himself. On the way back to Lander we detoured to South Pass City, an old mining town, where we stopped in the Atlantic City Mercantile Bar. Two cokes and a glass of orange juice later, I began to feel my energy return.

That night Ken took me to dinner at the Hitching Rack, a roadside restaurant popular with locals. We drank wine, ate mountains of food, and talked about our adventure. Ken seemed to know most of the other patrons in the restaurant, and he introduced me to an elderly woman who negotiated the crowded room with a walker. Watching her deliberate and difficult progress across the room, I thought of my own mother who walks painfully with a cane, I wondered how many years I would have left to lift a backpack and head into the wild.

A few days before in Colorado, I'd been overwhelmed with thoughts of wasted years and lost opportunities. By the time I came out of the wilderness with Ken, my thoughts had shifted from what had been lost to what I could create in the future. As I watched that old woman creep across the room, I thought to myself that from then on I would do only what I really wanted to do, only what seemed worth my time.



The next day I drove for miles on the dirt roads that cross the open range of the high country south of Lander. Ken had called his friend Bob Hellyer and asked him if he would reach me something about ranching and about the controversial issue of grazing rights. The cloud of dust I created obscured the view behind me, and I was following another dust cloud created by Bob Hellyer's four-wheel drive Ford pickup about half a mile ahead. We had taken a number of turns down roads that blended so well with the range that I might not have even noticed them if I had not been following Bob. The further we went, the rougher the roads were, and as we made the last turn, Bob pulled off and motioned for me to drive on to the ranch. The Oregon Trail passes through the ranch, and Bob stopped to talk to the outfitters who were taking a group of tourists along the Trail. My van may have been the only two-wheel drive vehicle ever to come down that increasingly rough road, and it came to an abrupt halt as the underbelly ran aground on the middle of the deeply rutted road.

A couple of wranglers ran over and insisted that they would free the van and bring it to me later. Without a thought, I turned my keys over to these strangers and walked the last half mile to the ranch.

Ahead I could see cottonwoods and other trees, a kind of oasis. Water, I thought. Bob had warned me that there would be few amenities at what he and his wife Martha call the Sweetwater Ranch. The only water, I discovered, is in the Sweetwater River that runs through the property. Whenever they make a trip to town, they bring back a barrel of fresh water for cooking, drinking, and washing. The ranch house has two rooms. The large room for cooking, eating, and socializing was a pony express station in the late nineteenth century. A sleeping room had been added on. The outhouse was some fifty feet away.

When I arrived, Martha was busy preparing a meal for the thirty odd folks who had paid a healthy sum to ride on horseback and in authentic covered wagons along the Oregon Trail. There was a side of beef in the propane fueled oven. I offered to help her finish the preparations, but she had everything under control and there seemed little left to do. In no time a crowd of folks filled the room and ate huge amounts of meat, potatoes, salad, rolls, and apple pie. They had come from England, Australia, France, Germany, Boston, and elsewhere for the experience of playing pioneer. An hour and a half later, there was plenty to do, and I dived in with the others to wash dishes and clean up. In another eight hours, the same ravenous crowd was back for a ranch breakfast.

That morning at breakfast, Bob introduced me to Sam Hampton, who owns a sheep ranch in north central Wyoming, some thirty-two miles south of the town of Ten Sleep. Sam's hobby is raising draft horses and restoring old covered wagons. Before I joined Bob for his morning rounds, Sam asked me to come along for a few miles on the Oregon Trail in a real 19th-century covered wagon pulled by two large draft horses. Plunging down the banks of the Sweetwater River with nothing to hold on to except the bottom of the wobbly bench, I looked down at the backs of the two powerful animals as they went into the water. Before I had time to be afraid, they bounded up the other side. Admiring these sleek, pedigreed animals, I thought about the original pioneers that had left Missouri weeks

before they crossed this spot—how dirty they must have been and how frightened they must have felt as they plunged down this river bank. Surely they stopped and bathed in the sweet water of the river before moving on through the vast grasslands beyond.

When I returned to the ranch, I helped Martha finish cleaning up from breakfast. By 10:00 a.m. the kitchen work was done and Martha's real work on the ranch began. Catering for outfitters is something she does only occasionally to earn extra money.

---

*Wilderness has many gifts—  
beauty, peace, quiet, spectacle,  
surprise, and abundant life—but for me  
the greatest gift was the message that I should  
come and go and leave no trace.  
To make my mark on the wilderness,  
to try to change it in any way,  
would be a sacrilege.*

---

Bob and Martha love their life, and they love talking about it. In the two days I spent with them, I got a glimpse of the kind of work involved in running a small family ranch. Like most ranchers in Wyoming they have a winter ranch and a summer range. At an altitude of more than 7,000 feet, Sweetwater is appropriate for grazing cattle only in the summer. Their main ranch and primary residence is just a few miles out from Lander. Their year-round stock are primarily mother

cows. There is one bull for every twenty to twenty-five cows. Most produce a calf every year, and those that fail to get pregnant, or "come up open" are sold. Except for a few that are kept for breeding stock, the calves are taken to market in the fall. Bob and Martha consider their operation a "small family ranch." Together with their three children, they do all the work themselves. "Small," however, is a relative term in Wyoming, for Bob's privately owned land combined with what he leases from the BLM stretches for miles.

February and March, calving time, are particularly busy months, and it is not uncommon for someone in the family to check on first-time mothers every hour of the twenty-four hour day. Often it is Martha who is out in the barn assisting a cow with a difficult birth at 20 below zero at 2:00 a.m. To help a cow deliver, Martha sometimes has to reach deep into the birth canal to turn the calf around, a process that not only requires strength, but a willingness to endure the pain in her arm caused by the intense contractions.

Looking straight into my eyes, Martha blurted out, "I love my work. And I'm afraid I won't be able to do it anymore."

Bob shares Martha's fear that they could lose their ranch. What concerns them both is that the movement to raise the grazing fee on public lands could push them and other small ranchers out of the business. At the time that I met them, they had almost given up hope of keeping grazing rights affordable. From their perspective, those who want to raise the fees have one goal: to push the ranchers off public lands. Environmentalists, they insist, are wild extremists who understand nothing about ranching. Ranchers, according to Bob, are caretakers of the land. He insists that they are doing a good job, that the range is in good shape, and people outside the West don't understand that homesteaders took all the good land, and that the BLM land that ranchers lease for \$1.91 per AUM (animal units per month) is inferior land, often without water, which the ranchers themselves must improve in order to use.

"Of course we pay more for private land. It's worth more. But we've almost given up talking to people. If grazing fees go too high, we'll lose the ranch."

In the next few weeks I'd hear lots of talk about grazing rights and the damage that cattle do not only to the open



range but to forests, streams, and designated wilderness. More than once I would see land degraded and eroded by overgrazing, but Bob and Martha seemed to be taking care of the land as well as the cows.

I spent the rest of the day with Bob on the open range. We made the rounds in his truck, while Martha rounded up a hundred or more head of cattle and moved them from one pasture to another. Stopping to check on a small windmill that brings underground water to the surface for the cows, evaluating the condition of the range, and spotting wildlife through binoculars kept us busy longer than it took Martha to finish her work on horseback.

Sagebrush never grows high enough to provide privacy. That's how I learned about one more use for a pickup truck. "Excuse me, but I'm going behind the truck for a minute," is a gentleman cowboy's way of telling a lady he's going to take a leak. After hiking out across the range to check on the condition of a stream the cattle used, I finally got up the courage to tell Bob that it was my turn to go behind the truck. But unfortunately, the ground was so dry and cracked that I created my own stream that ran lazily under the truck and beyond. There are probably unwritten rules about pissing downhill, but I thought of this too late. Bob had walked a decent distance away and pretended not to notice.

As I was driving away from the Sweetwater Ranch later that afternoon, I stopped and got out for a last look at that compelling landscape. There were no charismatic features. No one would think to make this a National Park, and yet there was something overwhelmingly beautiful about it. I waited for the dust I had raised to settle, and then I slowly scanned all three hundred and sixty degrees of the horizon, moving my body and my eyes counterclockwise. Then I saw a wild horse running full tilt, mane and tail streaming behind. I got back in the van and eased down the road. Going in the same direction, the horse was still running.

Sam Hampton invited me to come to his place to learn about sheep ranching. I arrived in the town of Ten Sleep in the early afternoon the next day, phoned Mahogany Butte Ranch to make sure they were at home, and drove the thirty-two miles south through open range and red rock canyons. When I arrived at the ranch, Sam and his strikingly beautiful wife welcomed me as if I were an old friend. We sat on a grassy lawn edged with lush flower gardens and drank a root beer; then we piled in Sam's air conditioned pickup and drove out across the range. Sam, too, has his bones to pick with environmentalists, who he believes are responsible for regulations that prohibit the use of herbicides on BLM land to kill troublesome plants like the cocklebur, which gets caught and matted in the sheep's wool, reducing its value. Many people in the west, however, are troubled by those who put economic concerns ahead of the health of the environment.

In just a couple of hours I saw more wildlife on Sam's land than I had seen in the Pope Agie Wilderness. There were antelope running in a small herd, deer feeding alongside sheep, a pair of elk browsing in the distance, and a fox bounding across the road. Sam pointed out a golden eagle soaring above in the company of a hawk. The eagle, he explained, will occasionally take a lamb, but far more costly to a sheep rancher are coyotes that will take a lamb in the blink of an eye. One rancher told me that coyotes will take a mature sheep; others say they stick to lambs and smaller animals.

It was almost dusk when I left Mahogany Butte Ranch. I drove slowly back along the deserted road. Not one vehicle passed me for thirty-two miles before I came to Ten Sleep. About a mile after I left the ranch behind, a pair of coyote crossed my path. I wondered if they were joining a pack or hunting alone. Before I made it to town, three groups of mule deer crossed the

road—a doe with twin fawns, two does and a fawn, and four young deer that looked like yearlings, one of them a buck. I had come to Wyoming to be in the wilderness, and I had found a strange mixture of the wild and the domesticated; cows in the wilderness and wild things on the range.

The next morning I woke up in a commercial campground in Ten Sleep. Outside my tent a horse was grazing. In just a few days, I'd had extraordinary experiences, none of which I could have predicted. Now I was feeling anxious and disoriented, probably because for the first time since I left home I had no idea what I would do next. Three days before I'd cavalierly declared that I wouldn't do anything that didn't seem important and that I didn't want to do. I had left home to go into the wilderness, to be open to whatever happened to me there, and to change what was not working in my life. That morning in Ten Sleep I lost confidence that I could make anything else happen, and I wondered if the experiences of the past few days had been a fluke. Anyway, I thought, I'd had my fling in the wilderness. Wouldn't it be something of an indulgence to stay much longer? Weren't there people at home who needed me—my aging parents, my friends, Jerome? For a fleeting moment I questioned what I was doing, and I thought of spending only another week in Wyoming and maybe a week in Montana, then heading back east early in September in time to enjoy Indian summer at home. But the moment passed. Over a huge rancher's breakfast at a local cafe, I got out the map of Wyoming.

I located a place near the Wind River Indian Reservation that Ken had urged me to see. As I was pulling out of his driveway, he had called me back, "Before you leave Wyoming, go up to Dickinson Park. And remember, lots of people know me in this part of Wyoming. Mention my name and you're golden."

"Golden" was the word for everything I saw winding up a narrow one lane road to an altitude of 9,300 feet. Looking to the east I saw what seemed like most of Wyoming and half of Nebraska and maybe even part of South Dakota. It was late afternoon, and the sun was already low behind the ridge I was climbing. The light glowed magically on the rocks and grazing lands all around me. The air was clear and clean. When I finally came to the end of miles of switch-backs, the road leveled out and I entered the Shoshone National Forest. After some miles of traveling ever deeper into the forest, I finally arrived at the edge of Dickinson Park. At first I thought I was coming to a state park, but I learned after I arrived that the word park in these parts is used to refer to a large open meadow such as the one opening out from Lower Silas Lake. There was only one other group of campers: two women with their young children whose husbands were on their annual fishing trip deep in the Pope Agie Wilderness.

I pitched my tent in a secluded spot looking out on the high rocky peaks of the Continental Divide. Except for pit toilets and picnic tables provided by the forest service, there was no sign of human activity. No cars, no lights, no sound. I sat down and looked out at the southern end of the Wind River Range and to the wilderness beyond, where I was no longer surprised to see cows grazing in the distance. I had quickly become accustomed to being alone in such places. While not so long ago I would have been a little apprehensive as darkness came on, I now enjoyed the soft light that comes after the sun drops behind the mountains. There were threatening clouds gathering in the west, and I looked forward to the cozy feeling inside a tent when it rained.

After setting up camp, I drove two miles back up the road to Allen Brothers Outfitters only to find that Jim and Mary Alien had gone down the mountain that afternoon and would not be back for some time. Jim was going hunting in



the Yukon, Mary to buy school clothes for the children in Lander. The place was being run by a group of summer employees—young people just out of college, a forty-something professional woman from Seattle, and a part-time rancher. When I mentioned Ken Clanton's name, the cook invited me to chip in eight dollars and stay for a huge meal of chili, rice, cornbread, salad, and gingerbread. After dinner I joined in the conversation, which wandered from wildlife to range ecology to grazing fees. As darkness fell the group dispersed and I returned to my campsite. The road was barely distinguishable from the sage brush and grass around it, and I once found myself off the road heading toward a line of trees. Backing up, I recovered the road, and with some difficulty found my campsite and settled into my sleeping bag just as the rain began to fall.

The next day dawned clear and bright, so I packed a lunch and hiked out across the meadow toward the Continental Divide at the northern end of the Pope Agie Wilderness. As I looked out at all that ice and rock, my spirits lifted and I wondered how I could have been so anxious just twenty-four hours before. I spent that entire cloudless day hiking and exploring. My heart was quiet, my mind clear. My inner state was in perfect harmony with the clarity of the day. This was the first day that I'd spent all alone in wilderness, far removed from the world where I felt so many people had a claim on me.

From the little time I'd spent in wilderness, I'd learned that something happens to me there that doesn't happen when I'm walking through city streets or even sitting alone in an urban garden. A few minutes to a few hours after leaving the world of parking lots and automobiles my mind begins to clear and a lot of meaningless mental traffic dissipates. In the wilderness it's necessary to focus on personal survival from moment to moment, whether it's a matter of choosing the right fork in a path, finding a safe place to cross a rushing stream, taking care not to fall going down a steep hill, looking out for dangerous animals, or making sure to drink enough water. In the wilderness, looking out for yourself is the first priority. It's a place where taking on responsibility for others in any major way isn't even possible.

The wilderness and its many life forms, and for that matter most of the people who go there, want and need nothing but to be left alone. Wilderness has many gifts—beauty, peace, quiet, spectacle, surprise, and abundant life—but for me the greatest gift was the message that I should come and go and leave no trace. To make my mark on the wilderness, to try to change it in any way, would be a sacrilege. Maybe, I thought, to be left alone to live life the way they choose is all most people want. It's certainly all I wanted.

Late in the afternoon when I came back to the campground, I realized that I'd not seen another human being since I woke that morning. I'd had a perfect day. Alone out there, I was nothing but a minuscule speck in the universe, not somebody's wife, somebody's daughter, somebody's mother, or somebody's friend. If I'd sprained an ankle and died there, I would have been dinner for buzzards or coyotes. Alive, I was nobody. And nobody, for the moment, was who I wanted to be.

The last thing I wanted to be was the good girl I'd tried to be all my life. Letting go felt like a matter of life and death. But how, I wondered, could I possibly let go? A good girl was what everyone expected me to be.

Or did they? I thought back to my mother's parting words:

"You can have a good time or a bad time. I always choose the good. I expect you will too."

My father's last words were a little more surprising. "You stay as long as you need to stay, sugar girl."

Maybe at this point in my life the burden that had

once been placed on me as a small child had long been forgotten by those who put it there. Maybe the strong feelings I had that I was responsible for the welfare of others were coming from inside of me. Maybe the demands that I thought others were making on me were really demands I was making on myself. Maybe I was in the process of getting myself free.

Just the day before I had wondered if what I was doing made any sense, if I should go home early to be with those I imagined were missing or needing me. As I sat at the end of the day watching the sun set behind the peaks, I let go of those feelings. Maybe my children, my parents, my husband, and my friends were quite capable of making good lives for themselves without my help. That was a really scary thought.

That night when I returned for dinner at Allen Brothers, the place was buzzing with excitement. Geoff Tabin and George Lowe, world class mountain climbers, had just come in from the back country. George Lowe's wife and baby had gone along and stayed in the base camp while the men climbed nearby. Geoff, who is also a physician, has climbed some of the most formidable peaks on seven continents. He told me that there is no place on the planet he loves more than the Wind River Range in Wyoming. Talking to him and George Lowe that afternoon, I got a sense of their commitment to living at full throttle. I looked at George's wife and baby and wondered what it must be like to be tied to someone who takes the big risks over and over again. Geoff made it clear that he has no intention of giving up the kind of challenges he finds in climbing the world's highest and most treacherous peaks. To do so would be to become part of what he calls the spiritual middle class, and he wasn't willing to do that. Now I wasn't interested in taking up bungee jumping or technical climbing, but I had my own set of challenges. Just being alone in this remarkable place was a pretty big deal for me, but even more challenging was negotiating the wilderness within, the morass of thought, concerns, and lies that had been driving my life.



The second biennial conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) will take place on July 17-19, 1997 at the University of Montana in Missoula. Gary Snyder, Rick Bass, Pattiann Rogers, and David Abram are among the prominent writers and scholars participating in the conference.

For submission information, contact:

John Tallmadge, President-Elect, ASLE  
6538 Teakwood Court  
Cincinnati, OH 45224-2112  
(513) 681-0944  
jtall@interramp.com







